The Corpse-Angel's Blessing

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The Corpse-Angel's Blessing

by DBMars

Summary

Will Graham is the omegan prince of the kingdom of Gaulemagne. Despite being the eldest child of the murdered king and queen, he cannot take the throne - the crown is reserved for alphas only, and his brother Matthew will rule once he comes of age. In the meantime, Will and beta princess Alana are under the guardianship of the Regent, their father's first cousin: Frederick Raul de Brûler, Earl of Chilton.

Gaulemagne suffers under Chilton's rule. Will's only method of resistance is writing anonymous pamphlets about omegan rights and getting them into the hands of those who can affect change.

Chilton knows this brilliant omega is trouble, and arranges a marriage for him with Alpha King Hannibal, the sovereign of Eidermark, the last "civilized" kingdom before the Northern Wastes - a tundraland filled with dangerous nomads uniting under the banner of a man calling himself the Great Red Dragon.

Will is sold to King Hannibal the Vicious, traded along with a herd of cattle and casks of wine for weapons and armor. He travels to Eidermark determined to stand up for his beliefs and resist any way he can.

And yet... there is more to King Hannibal than anyone knows...

Notes

Happy Omega Will Fest, and thanks so much to Will Graham's Ass for organizing this brilliant event!

I was thrilled to snag the following prompt and I would have cried if I hadn't gotten it!

"Will is a prince of his kingdom, seen as a failure for being an omega. He is sent away to a different kingdom, one with an alpha prince who has found infamy in his viciousness. But what Will doesn't expect is that the prince, Hannibal, is very accepting of omegas. Will learns that hannibal's viciousness does not extend to him and that, inf act, he finds only tenderness pointed toward him from this foreign prince."

This is only part one of a possible epic length fantasy adventure, but I ran out of time (of course!). Please enjoy the beginnings of this tale. Based on the response I may continue this, maybe as part of the festival next year! Anything's possible.

Thanks again for including me, and enjoy! Remember to read all the fics in this collection and leave lots of awesome lovely comments for the authors. That shit is catnip for us and it can turn a bad day into a good one with just a few lines of appreciation for our creations.

Love you! xoxo -- DB

The Virtue of the Vicious

When an idea, a concept, a framework has existed for thousands of years, the length of its presence in our collective consciousness does not give it added weight, especially as human logic continues its trajectory. Eons ago, our ancestors were Animists, certain that every animal, stone, and tree contained a spirit that must not only be acknowledged and respected, but appeased, sometimes through human sacrifice. Five thousand years ago, as the written word developed across our continent, so too developed a new religion – the pantheon of Old Gods. Some of these gods were nearly as bloodthirsty as the animal spirits that once ruled our people. Others, like Morgansai, god of logic, reason, and justice, cultivated in his followers a more civilized mindset. Progress came again in the form of the Book and the One God, when His gospel came to earth through the Seven Prophets. If you, reader, are a devout follower of the One, than you have embraced new knowledge.

Now, take this reasoning, and apply it to the Alpha-Omega Paradigm. The caste system we suffer across this vast continent originates from a time before ancient humans learned to write, predating the craft of signs and symbols to represent language. One of the earliest surviving carvings from ancient Bittersea is a code of laws governing the rights of alphas, betas, omegas, and the psy – the lost gender, whose former existence has never been firmly proven. Reader, transport yourself back to that archaic time, to when those symbols were chiseled into the cave wall at Dhumgimaz Cavern. That ancient and savage era where flat rocks in sacred groves were stained with human blood sacrifice. Do you fear the world around you, steeped in superstition?

Those who insist that the Paradigm is valid, who refuse to acknowledge the innate humanity of omegas, often cite the ancientness of the framework as proof of its validity. Their essential argument is that these ways have been with civilization for so long, they are inseparable from our society even in our era of enlightenment. But that argument's bitter twin is Animism. How can a person praise one set of ideas from that savage and uneducated time, and condemn another?

Perhaps it is because the physical manifestation of the Paradigm is all around us every day. We live in a world of alphas, betas, and omegas – they are physical beings where animal spirits and the One God are not. However, while it is heretical to say, if one examines both schools of religion through the new sharp lens of our great scientists and philosophers, we have exactly as much tangible evidence of the existence of the One God as the ancient animist did for their beloved and bloodthirsty spirits.

These same great minds all cry out for justice, and those devoted to science and religion both have called for an end to the Paradigm. St. Velastus, after whom so many cathedrals in Gaulemagne are named, was martyred six hundred years ago in Ruthenia. He begged his followers to give omegas the same grace and legal rights as betas and alphas. This is the true reason he was tortured to death by the Tsar, not because of his devotion to the Book and his adamant spreading of its gospel, as many believe and as the church teaches. I have it on good authority that copies of his journals survive, and his arrest and subsequent execution were a result of his passion for omegan equality, which he saw as holy and just in the eyes of the One

God. He was willing to give his life for his convictions and is the first recorded hero of our movement.

If St. Velastus's sacrifice is not enough to change the hearts and minds of alphas and betas, we turn to the enlightened work of our scholars, who concern themselves with more earthbound evidence. The scientific investigations of Marcus Teofio of Bittersea and Alois of Houtland have proven, over many years of experimentation and investigation, that omegas have the same intellectual potential as alphas and betas. They have the capacity to be intelligent, rational, and capable of the same tasks as any other human being.

If it is tangibility our oppressors must have, then I encourage them to scrutinize the evidence that is in Miloslav's treatise as well as the observable world. Omegas everywhere are capable of the same things as other genders. They can reason. They can do deep intellectual tasks, as evidenced by the many scholarly works they have produced when allowed access to education. Even now, the Sovereign of Lothien has an omega as the royal physician. Omegas can be strong and warlike, lest we forget General Arethusa of Gaulemagne who led her troops to victory over the invading Ruthenian army in 1293. God saw fit to send his visions to an omega and make her a general, giving her the power and grace to protect our lands from invasion. Name a profession or a task and an omega has done it, though their stories go unrecorded and their deeds unsung.

It is with this truth in my pen that I now examine the laws of succession in our country, our beloved Gaulemagne. These laws state that the children of the Sovereign qualify to inherit the crown, and thus control over most of the governance of our fair lands, in the following order:

If the firstborn is an alpha, he or she will be named heir to the throne. Birth order matters only in the case of multiple alphas being born to the royal family. If the firstborn is a beta or an omega, the next alpha in line pushes them aside to claim the crown. Should no alphas be born to the royal couple, the succession moves to the closest relatives of the sovereign, searching for the most closely related alpha available. Betas with a direct connection to the throne are given seats on the Crowned Council, and their influence is felt as they act as liaisons between the Sovereign and the Conclave of Delegates, each parish's elected representatives.

But what of omegas born to the Sovereign? Not only are they denied a chance at the throne, no matter their birth order, they are barred from the Crowned Council and the Conclave of Delegates both. Why? Tradition. And if one challenges that tradition, one is bombarded with drivel regarding omegan intellectual capacity. The usual excuse is that omegas are not suited for leadership roles because of their instincts and heats. Instinct pushes an omega toward protecting their family, making a safe and comfortable home, and caring deeply for their mate and children. Are these instincts so repulsive? Should not a king or queen love their country, love their subjects as if they were their own children, and treat the totality of their lands as their beloved home? As for heats, yes, the sovereign would be unavailable for ten to fourteen days twice a year, three times in rare cases. But these heats can be prepared for, and nearly all the business of governance can be handled by the Crowned Council and the Conclave of Delegates during this time, with the Sovereign's designated regent acting on his or her behalf.

Contrary to popular belief, there are periods of time within a heat that the omega is rational and able to carry out all intellectual functioning. Uncomfortable, yes, but not impossible. If there was an emergency decision to be made, it could be discussed and dealt with during the heat if timed correctly.

Consider an omega's typical behavior when not in heat. While stereotypes serve no one, omegas are typically level-headed, make wise decisions based on evidence, and are in no way impatient, rash, or quick to anger. An ideal temperament for a Sovereign, wouldn't you agree?

In contrast, the alpha. Their supremacy is based on traits that, during the dawn of mankind, were vital to our survival. Strength, speed, aggression, violent instinct, the desire to mate and produce offspring – these traits were, admittedly, important building blocks for ancient humans as they struggled to survive against the climate and the animal kingdom. In older, darker days, alphas were needed to fight clan wars and protect the villages. The need for this kind of instinctive behavior is draining away from our modern society. We live in a time of reason, of laws and treaties, of a religion that preaches compassion and love for all.

And so, I demand that Gauls ask themselves how they can worship our One God, who tells us that the meek shall inherit the earth, that we should love greatly and turn our faces away from violence, and still deny omegas any sort of social rights, no matter if that omega is born a peasant or the son of a great king. Omegas everywhere, princes and servants, craftsmen, and farmers, none of them are allowed the basic rights enjoyed by alphas and betas as proof of their humanity. Omegas cannot own their own property. Many are denied an education. They have no control over their bodies and are subject to arranged marriages and to bear the children of their forced spouses. They are barred from holding any noble title with land or means attached and cannot inherit money or property unless they are married to a beta or alpha. They are bought and sold like livestock; those who are poor or without a family are no more than slaves. The wealthy are treated like expensive paintings or purebred dogs, their buying and selling hidden beneath the guise of dowries.

I appeal now to the beta population, which outnumbers both alpha and omega. You enjoy the same rights as the alpha, aside from access to the throne itself. But you must suffer the rules of succession the same as everyone else. Look to your Gaulemagne royal family now, and ask yourselves who is better suited to rule–

A knock at the door gave Will a full body jolt, causing his quill pen to drag across the parchment in an ugly slice. Swiftly, he gathered his papers together and pressed the hidden catch beneath his writing desk. A secret compartment sprang open, revealing a thin slot. He slid the papers within, the newest one on top, hoping the ink didn't smear too badly, and snapped the compartment shut. "Come in," he called, turning casually in his chair, and pretending to examine a letter from a dog breeder in Sicambri.

An attendant opened the door and stood aside, holding it so that Lord Frederick, Earl of Chilton could enter. "The Right Honorable Earl of Chilton," the attendant announced, as if Will didn't know who he was. Everyone in Gaulemagne knew Chilton – first cousin to the late King Beauregard and acting Sovereign, serving as Regent until Will's brother Matthew came of age. Never mind that both Will and his sister Alana were old enough to rule. It didn't

matter – Will was an omega, and Alana was a beta. The kingdom had to wait until their younger brother, the destined alpha, could take the throne.

And while Gaulemagne waited, the country suffered under the Regent's mismanagement, buckling under his frivolity and ignorance, his intermittent cruelty. Will despised him.

"My prince," Chilton greeted, sweeping the necessary bow. As if Will couldn't see the curl of disdain on his mouth every time he was forced to show any deference to an omega.

"Cousin," Will muttered the greeting, setting down the letter with a sigh. Winston, one of Will's many dogs, sat up from where he'd been lounging on the rug at Will's feet, eyeing Chilton to see if he posed a threat.

"I am the bearer of glad tidings today, Your Highness," Chilton announced, even as he stole a glance at himself in the chamber's gilt-edged mirror. He was dressed in one of Gaulemagne's latest fashions – a puffy-sleeved doublet of violet and white velvet paired with bell-shaped short pants that revealed long swaths of leg encased in hosiery. The finishing touch was a matching floppy hat adorned with a spray of peacock feathers. Will found the ensemble ridiculous, as did the common public, he was sure. Chilton was not a popular ruler by any means, and Will well knew the kingdom at large was counting down the days until Matthew's coronation.

The problem was, the people of Gaulemagne, Will included, were unsure what kind of sovereign Matthew would be. While Chilton and the Crowned Council worked tirelessly to muzzle any whispers of the crown prince's scandals, some slipped through their fingers, grains of sand from a child's cupped hands.

"Good news… You've, ah… decided to fire your tailor?" Will guessed, the question twisting at the end with the barb of sarcasm.

"Fire my… *no*, Will, that's not why I've come." Chilton glared at him, which elicited a growl from Winston that made the Regent jump. Will stifled a smile by biting the inside of his lip. "I have," Chilton began again, a grand vibrato to his voice, squaring his shoulders, "arranged your future happiness and, through it, the continued prosperity of Gaulemagne."

Will stood slowly, his movements unhindered by the simple gray tunic he wore over darker gray breeches. He shivered at the chill that clung to the marble floors. The palace was grand and filled with light, which made it drafty, trapped in winter while the warmth outside beckoned spring. Winston stood as well, pressing his shoulder against Will's leg.

"Arranged my future happiness," Will said, his veins going white as his heart rabbeted for its warren. "What is it, ah, that you've *arranged*, Frederick?"

"Your marriage!" Frederick exclaimed with a beaming smile. He came forward with both hands raised as if to cup Will's face but thought better of it when Winston growled again. "Your — ahem — *marriage*," he repeated, clearing his throat.

Will's fists clenched at his sides. Winston whined, pawing at his leg. There was a long, taut silence, filled only by the distant shouts of the guards on the training ground that wafted up

through the windows of Will's chamber, and the beating of his heart, footsteps fleeing into silence.

"My dear boy." Chilton's tone was one of sugared condescension. "You knew this day would come."

"I thought I had m-more time." Will's bottom lip quivered, just for a moment. He drew a shaky breath. "I won't turn 22 until next year – I'm not… prime breeding age yet…"

"You won't be married until after your birthday, dear," Chilton soothed. "Don't worry – besides, the extra time should help you acclimate to your new home."

Will swallowed, his face burning, bitter acid clawing at the back of his throat. "And who have you *sold me* to?"

Chilton sighed. "I should have known you'd be ungrateful. Do you have any idea how many months of negotiations–"

"*Who*?" Will snapped. Winston's ears went flat against his head.

"Hannibal, the King of Eidermark," Chilton said, his tone clipped with impatience.

"Eidermark?" Will scoffed. He raised his hands to his hair, running them slowly through his dark curls, eyes focused on nothing.

Chilton crossed the chamber, looking like a feathered plum with legs against the vibrant greens and jewel-like blues of the room's intricate murals, depicting forests, grassy plains, peaceful rivers, and the turquoise southern coast. He poured them each a goblet of wine from the sideboard and brought Will's glass to him, a tentative peace offering. Will took the cup, the smell making his stomach turn. Still, he bolted it down, wiping his lips with the heel of his hand. "Eidermark," he repeated, his voice withering in his throat.

"Yes, Eidermark," Chilton said crossly, sipping his own wine. "A land rich with ore, home to the finest weaponsmiths on the continent, and the mightiest soldiers, lest we forget that they defend the border against invaders from the Northern Wastes and keep the savages at bay."

"Savages," Will echoed. "You call the nomads savage, and ignore the… *savagery* of the King of Eidermark himself? His-his *viciousness*?"

"Eidermark is the last gasp of civilization before the Northern Wastes," Chilton noted. "You can't expect it to be as developed and refined as Gaulemagne, dear cousin. That goes for the nation's sovereign as well. A ruler reflects his lands just as his lands reflect his rule."

Will curled his lip, fury singing along his nerves. "You ought to take that advice to heart," he growled. "The country peasants are starving, Frederick, while you spend the nation's gold on-on… seaside palaces and frivolous pastimes–!"

"Watch your tone," his beta cousin warned. "I am your Regent and your guardian, and I have spent a considerable amount of time on these negotiations and a great deal of *money* on your dowry."

“Oh? And what did you receive in return? How much was I worth?” Will spat, tossing his empty goblet on the desk with a clatter.

“I thought you’d like to see the contract.” Chilton pulled a jeweled scroll case from his belt and motioned Will over to the table near the windows. He plopped down in the seat with the best lighting, which happened to be where Will had his fishing lure supplies. Chilton opened the scroll case while Will heaved a sigh and carefully moved his threads, hooks, and feathers to the other side of the table and dragged over a chair.

Chilton unfurled a parchment, decorated with stylized alpha, beta, and omega symbols entwined with purple lilies, the national flower of Gaulemagne. It was a contract, clearly, and Will spotted his full name several times – Prince William James Graham of the House of Beauregard-Devereaux. And yet, the signatures at the bottom were those of Frederick Raul de Brûler, Earl of Chilton and King Hannibal Lecter the 8th, Sovereign of Eidermark. As an omega, Will’s consent was entirely unnecessary.

“First, your dowry,” Chilton said, pointing to that section of the document. “Along with your hand in marriage, Eidermark receives one-thousand-head of cattle, 500 barrels of wine, 700 bolts of the finest cloth our weavers produce, and a substantial sum in gold and jewels.” He pointed to the number inked onto the contract with a proud, beaming smile.

Part of Will wanted to be proud as well. It was ingrained in him from a young age that he must learn his lessons and etiquette, take care of his body, learn to sing and practice courtly graces, all in order to be sold to the highest bidder for a price most advantageous to Gaulemagne. But he shoved that instinct away as if someone had thrust a torch in his face. “And in return?” he asked, voice brittle, hands curled into fists where they rested on the table.

“Eidermark will supply us with armaments – enough for five thousand soldiers.”

Will stamped out the surge of pride again. Eidermark weapons were the best on the continent, their metals light but durable, their swords perfectly balanced, their arrow-fletching unmatched. One could argue that Gaulemagne got the better end of the deal.

“Well?” Chilton raised an eyebrow, sitting back in the chair and crossing his velvet-clad arms with a smug smile.

“Why do you need armaments for that many warriors?” Will asked, instead of dishing out the praise Chilton was so obviously ravenous for. “Are you expecting a war, cousin?”

Chilton stuttered, unhorsed by Will’s question. “I don’t expect an omega to understand the arts of war.”

Will scoffed, rolling his eyes. “Have you read every volume of Cerridwyn’s *Drums of Battle?* Because I have.”

“Military strategy is not a proper subject for you, young man,” Chilton scolded. “But if you must know, my advisers believe that the best way to avoid a war of any sort is to prepare. A

show of force will make anyone think twice about opposing me – I mean, the throne, of course."

"And which enemy is, ah… having *thoughts*?" Will challenged.

"Well, you know Lothien's always sniffing around!" Chilton rolled up the contract with angry little snaps of his wrists.

It was Will's turn to lean back and cross his arms with a knowing smile. "I think you're concerned about… civil unrest."

"Civil-!" Chilton sputtered.

"You should be," Will interjected, getting to his feet as well. "The country lords and the peasants have been in meetings with the merchant guilds. That, ah, that last birthday party of yours, when you had that enormous swan-shaped boat built, feasting on it as you went up and down the river in full view of the entire city… while children are dying in the fields for want of food – one could say that was the tipping point."

"You don't know what you're talking about," Chilton snapped, though Will could tell by the spots of color on his cheeks that he'd struck a nerve. "You've always been trouble, William James Graham, always!"

Understanding dawned. Will got up and went to the window, pushing the casement open wider. Outside, his brother Matthew sparred shirtless on the training ground with several of the guards, all who seemed hesitant to attack their Crown Prince. Matthew took advantage, knocking them all down with his wooden sword, kicking one in the side and laughing. "You want me out of the country before the coronation," Will said, turning back to the Regent.

"I'd hoped not to have such an ugly conversation on such a beautiful day," Chilton replied coldly, pouring himself another glass of wine, eyeing Winston where he lay on a cushion near Will's desk. He lingered near the sideboard, as if physical distance might offer some protection from what he was about to say. "I know you wrote that… *idiotic* pamphlet that's been circulating all around Gaulemagne."

"Pamphlet?" Will narrowed his eyes and furrowed his brow in a look of constructed confusion. "Which one?"

"You know which one," Chilton hissed. "*Concerning the Rights of Omegas in Gaulemagne and Across the Continent*."

"Do you have a copy? I'd love to read it."

His cousin scoffed again, taking a bitter sip of wine. "Deny it all you want, but you've been a willful, ungrateful omega your entire life. I'll never forget that day I caught you training with *weapons* out in the forest behind the summer palace. All the governesses and dancing teachers and music tutors you chased away. And now, you're undermining the succession with your little manifestos! You think you're so clever, don't you?" He got in Will's face now, smelling of wine and a cloying perfume that made Will's stomach turn. "Do you realize

what could happen if you stay in Gaulemagne? Whether you want it or not, there are factions here that would rather see you on the throne than Matthew, or even your sister Alana. These omegan rights advocates – if they unite under your banner, fight in your name to put you on the throne, it won't matter whether or not you gave your consent, whether or not you were involved in the plotting – your brother will have no choice but to *execute you* for treason, you dull creature!"

Will felt the blood drain from his face. Winston whined, but Will gave him the sign to stay where he was.

"So," Chilton said, draining his cup after a barbed pause. "You're welcome. For brokering the dowry of a lifetime, and getting you out of Gaulemagne before you're imprisoned, drawn, and quartered. I'm saving your life, Will."

Will turned away, looking out the window again. Now Matthew was following a kitchen maid about in the garden, teasing her, trying to lift her dress. She managed to cajole him enough to allow him to let her get away. But Will saw her smile as she turned to go back inside. It melted in moments, becoming a thin, bloodless line.

She was a pretty omega with no family. Lucky, it would seem, to have a position at the palace, even as a scullery maid. In return for the work, she received her keeping, along with a small but steady stipend. But sometimes, that work involved spreading her legs without complaint for alpha and beta alike. The only difference between her and Will was that Will had royal blood and could produce heirs. But all that meant was that his forced leg-spreading had political ramifications.

Someday, Will hoped with a feverish intensity, a fire fanned by injustice, her life would truly be her own. It would be harder to have his pamphlets published and distributed when living in Eidermark, but not impossible. Once he arrived, he'd start looking for who to bribe. Will had an uncanny ability to read the intentions and emotions of others, though he'd never told anyone what he could do. Better no one suspected.

"You'll be happy in Eidermark, Will." Chilton's condescending words weighed as heavily as the ringed hand that pressed on his shoulder. "I've heard the land is beautiful and unspoiled. And take heart, cousin – you may bring all of your dogs with you." Chilton turned him and cupped his face now, as he'd clearly wanted to before, bestowing a kiss on Will's forehead. "Well, there's no time to waste – you'd better start packing."

As the door shut behind the Regent, Will sank onto the floor, gathering Winston in his arms, pressing his face into the dog's fur.

Marriage.

No, *slavery*.

Eidermark.

King Hannibal the Vicious.

He closed his eyes and let his tears fall.

Where the Crow's Wing Brings Him

Chapter Summary

> Will undertakes the long journey to Eidermark, and sees evidence of King Hannibal's savage ways. A strange fissure opens in his mind, through which emerges a golden pendulum that reveals to him anyone's point of view, no matter how brutal.
>
> tw: forced gynecological exam

Sir Jack of Crawford entered Will's tent just as Georgia finished strapping Will into a set of studded leather armor that matched what the rest of the retinue's guards wore. Jack had an embroidered cloth mask over the bottom half of his face, as was proper for an alpha in close quarters with an omega he was forbidden from even thinking about. Will could smell the sweet spice of clove oil that dotted the mask, further muffling any scent Will might exude.

An antiquated, unnecessary precaution in most cases, Will thought. He wasn't in heat, and Jack wasn't in rut. Besides, the captain was bonded to his mate, Bella, in every way – as her alpha and a man who loved her faithfully. The mask served as a visual reminder of the status quo – that Will's body was the totality of his use, and that Jack wasn't responsible for his own actions, should he accidentally get a whiff of Will at the wrong time. All this disguised a chivalry.

Jack approached, examining the borrowed uniform, pausing to tighten a pauldron buckle. He nodded to Georgia, as if to say *well done.*

"Thanks," Will said, giving her a crooked smile.

"I'll get your horse ready," she said, slipping through the large octagonal tent's flaps.

They watched her go, then turned to one another. Jack lifted the metal and leather helm from the top of Will's trunk and slipped it gently over his head, smoothing Will's curls across his forehead and out of the way. He stepped back, looking Will over. Will straightened his shoulders like he was one of Jack's guards being inspected by his captain.

"Your Highness," Jack said dubiously. "I still think it's too dangerous."

"It mitigates danger," Will argued as Zoe, another of his dogs, pawed open the tent flap and let herself in, sniffing around for something to eat. "Anyone attacking the retinue will think I'm in the carriage. That'll give me time to escape."

Jack sighed, sinking to one knee to pet Zoe with his gloved hand. "The Regent would object, if he were here."

“But he’s not here.”

“It isn’t proper. You’ll arrive in Eidermark with rough hands, smelling like horses–”

Will huffed, a harsh, frustrated rush of air. “The day before our arrival, I’ll dress properly, and show up in the carriage. Nobody needs to know what happened in between.”

Jack faltered, so Will plunged on. “If you think I’m spending weeks laying around in th-that… *cage* on wheels, you’re wrong, Jack.”

“Cage,” Jack scoffed. “A cage draped in the finest silk, with feather cushions…” He trailed off, looking at Will with tender eyes that emoted what his mask obfuscated. “I never should have taught you to fight,” he mused. “Trained you like a common soldier…”

Will straightened his posture. “Jack…”

Jack rested a hand on his armored shoulder. Will could feel the weight of the connection in lieu of the touch itself. “But how could I have refused, after what you went through?”

“You took a risk, doing it,” Will said. “And… maybe I don’t say it enough, but I’m… *grateful* you did.”

Jack nodded, a liquid sheen covering his dark eyes. He blinked a few times. “Well then,” he said briskly, clapping his gloved hands together. “We’d best be off. Daylight’s burning.”

Will emerged from his tent, Zoe at his heels. As soon as he’d vacated, attendants hurried in to gather up his things and the tent itself. Georgia had his horse, a blue roan gelding, saddled and ready. Will rested his hand on the hilt of his sheathed sword and breathed in the fresh tang of morning air. Riding with the other guards and attendants was going to be so much better than what he’d suffered for the last three days – stuffy, luxurious isolation.

Will petted his steed’s neck and the horse turned to nuzzle his pauldron a moment. “Will you keep him in Eidermark?” Georgia asked, swinging up onto her own horse and adjusting the gold-trimmed riding robes she wore over sensible leggings and a tunic.

Will fit his foot in the stirrup and mounted, picking up the reins. Their horses joined the stream of riders and laden wagons that rattled past, a vast caravan of goods followed by the cattle and the men that drove the herd over the grassy plains of northern Gaulemagne. “I don’t know,” Will said, patting the horse’s neck again. Will had named the gelding Tai, the Iceni word for “stone;” the fine creature had been a birthday gift from his sister Alana. Will gripped the reins with sudden force, a physical manifestation of his attempt to push away the memory of their parting. There had been tears on both sides. He was lucky to have Georgia and Jack with him, his closest friends, but it was impossible, of course, to bring the princess along to join him in a new life.

Another dark thought – Jack would return to Gaulemagne after the wedding. Will would likely never see him again, either.

Winston trotted along at Will's side as he rode, Georgia on his other, Jack not far behind, keeping a close eye on the "young caravan guard" and the handmaiden. Each step brought them closer to Eidermark and felt like a nail being hammered through Will's heart.

"You're sulking," Georgia told him, letting go of the reins briefly to braid her hair to the side and fix it with a strap. The wind had picked up and blew the auburn strands near her face into a tangled halo.

"I have… every *right* to sulk," Will reminded her.

"I know," she said with a sigh.

Will realized, then, how selfish he'd been. "I'm sorry."

"Why?"

"I've been… focused on myself. On the… degradation of being traded for goods, like I'm a-a barrel of wine–"

"Or a cow," Georgia suggested, and they both laughed.

"But, ah… I haven't…" He trailed off, adjusting the helm for a moment. "Thank you for coming with me. You didn't have to. Gaulemagne was your home. Your parents…"

"Will be fine," Georgia comforted. She was the daughter of the royal stablemaster and had befriended Will at a young age. They'd found their first dog together, a puppy alone on the roadside, and raised it themselves. That dog, Bandit, had been the first of Will's ever-growing pack, and Georgia had been appointed Mistress of the Prince's Hounds, a paid position that allowed her family to hire someone else to help around the stables and gave Georgia the freedom to be Will's best friend and only handmaiden. In contrast, Alana kept six ladies-in-waiting, and Matthew had a bawdy crew of groomsmen and valets that he treated like his bosom compatriots one moment and his lowly servants the next, depending on his shifting moods. He'd killed one in a duel last year over a card game.

Will had bonded with Georgia because she, too, was an anomaly in her family. While she loved animals, she had a keen curiosity and a restless spirit that demanded more out of life than working for her older brother when he inherited the stablemaster position one day or marrying some merchant or tradesman with a comfortable income and having children. "I'm a wanderer," she finished after a short pause. "You know that. I've always wanted to see more of the world."

"We'll see how you feel when we get to Eidermark," Will muttered darkly.

Georgia paused; her thinking evidenced by the furrow in her brow. "How much older is he?"

Will sighed, the weight of his engagement settling over him like an extra layer of chain mail. "I can't find a confirmed record of his birth year. People say he's in his early thirties."

"Is that all?" Georgia raised her brows. "That's lucky, Will. The princess of Lothien had to marry Tsar Abel Gideonovich of Ruthenia at eighteen last year. He's at *least* fifty."

“Georgia,” Will warned. “I’m not interested in looking at th-the *bright side* of my slavery.”

She hummed, brushing an errant strand of hair behind her ear. Georgia was pretty. If Will had his freedom, he might have let himself love her. “I know,” she said. “I know.” Though she was a beta, Georgia knew the struggle. She’d shed tears of her own for Will when he’d broken the news of his arranged marriage to her. She was the one he trusted to sneak his omegan rights manifestos out of the palace and deliver them safely to the printing house. She oversaw their distribution in secret, and made sure copies found their way to people of influence in Gaulemagne. If Will were to be executed for treason, she would die the same way as his co-conspirator.

Despite the situation he found himself in, Will’s heart lifted as the journey went on, rising from its place of bitter tribulation. As they traveled slowly along the coastal road, crossing the border into Bittersea, Will found solace in the migration itself. He’d always enjoyed the wilds, preferring the Eastern Chateau or the manor on the southern coast of Gaulemagne where he could spend hours wandering the mountains or fishing and swimming in the balmy sapphire waters of the Armiterean Sea. When winter inevitably came, he’d always felt trapped in the capital city, Vercingetorix, with its narrow streets and crowded buildings, the spires of cathedrals stabbing at the sky, everything clumped together as close to the banks of the filthy Clovis river as possible.

Now, he was farther away from home than he’d ever been, surrounded by the grassy plains of Bittersea, swept by brisk, salty air, flanked on one side by the jagged coastline. At night, the stars were so bright, so captivating, that he couldn’t sleep, gazing up at them for hours on a blanket with the dogs curled up around him. This, he realized, was what freedom could be like.

Will understood very well that he enjoyed privileges that other omegas did not. His royal blood gave him certain protections. He lived in sumptuous safety, his virginity a well-guarded treasure. The average omega born to a merchant-class family often suffered his same fate – married off to an alpha for a handsome sum in return, the omega’s worth connected only to their sex organs.

Supply and demand were simple concepts. Alphas and omegas made up a much smaller fraction of the population. Some scholars posited that one day, they would die out, just as the psy did.

It was the omega with no family, no protection, who suffered most. They were slaves in every sense of the word. The lucky ones might find a position as a household servant, where the masters would protect them to a certain extent. Sheltered in this home, however, they were enslaved, forced not only into a life of hard labor, but were expected to lie down and open their legs for the master whenever he wished. There was always sex work, of course, and the prettiest omegas often found shelter in brothels.

Because of his privilege, Will had taken it upon himself to work for omegan rights in secret, doing what he could, which for the most part involved clandestine sums of money to omega charity groups. These organizations ran homes and facilities that provided omegas with protection, education, and a newfound family. His other asset, Will discovered, was writing. The wealthiest of the merchant class, and some of the lower nobles were sympathetic to the

cause. Already, there was pressure from the Conclave of Delegates on the Crowned Council to recommend the Regent change the laws.

That pressure, Will realized now, must have been increasing to the point where Chilton saw Will as a threat to the succession. Will knew he'd covered his tracks well, and that there was no proof he'd written the pamphlets or donated the money. But hard evidence of treason wasn't required if rebels united behind Will and fought in his name even without his consent.

The danger proved he'd been affecting real change. And now he was going to have to start all over again in Eidermark, without the network of omega supporters he and Georgia had developed.

He lamented this to Georgia one night when she came to join him on the blanket, sitting cross-legged and pulling Buster into her lap. "In Eidermark," she said, "I've read that there is no religion of the government. The church and state are separate, and every citizen is welcome to worship as they please. Of course, most people follow the Book. But there are pagans there, too, and maybe even Animists."

"It's a backwards country," Will huffed, shifting on his side and stroking Winston's ears. "Haven't… fully embraced, ah… modernity."

"Says the atheist."

Will scoffed. "The church has more problems than there are stars in the sky." He gestured up at the heavens. "But we've moved beyond sacrifices and magic spells."

"What's a prayer but a spell?" Georgia challenged. Oh, he loved this, when they disagreed and could debate. "What's a church but a temple? The only difference is that there is One God instead of a pantheon."

"Pagans leave offerings at altars. They believe i-in hexes and curses and possession and ritual sacrifice–"

Georgia laughed. "Just prayers again, Will. No matter the religion, followers ask the divine to intercede on their behalf. It's comparing six eggs to a half-dozen."

Will looked up at the unknowable cosmos. A star fell, and then another. What was a prayer but a wish?

He'd been so young when his mother had taught him the rhyme to wish on stars. It was one of his first memories of her. Now that he thought about it, the little song was no doubt a holdover from pagan times, a prayer to Lumeria, the moon goddess, champion of women, mother of the Eiriene, the twelve warrior angels who were said to protect omegas and dispense justice to those who abused them.

Lady, lady, gown of stars,

I've caught your diadem that fell,

In the night, the darkened hours,

Restore your gem and wish me well.

I wish…

I wish…

I wish to be happy one day. Truly happy.

"Well?" Georgia leaned over and stroked a curl across his forehead, her expression tender in the half-dark. "Did you make a wish?"

He smiled up at her even as tears pricked his eyes. "Of course," he said. "Just because I'm an atheist doesn't mean I don't… understand the instinct to pray. To beg for miracles."

She snuggled down next to him, like they were children again, and rested her head on his shoulder, hugging his middle. The dogs settled in around them. All Will could hear was the ocean, and the faint lowing of the cattle.

The cattle made the journey last far longer than it would have if the caravan was only bringing the wine, the other goods, and Will himself. The scouts and guards complained about the slow pace, but Will was intensely grateful for the plodding creatures and their tendency to wander off and need to be tracked, roped, and dragged back to the herd. The herd also prevented the retinue from going anywhere near Bittersea's cities, which meant Will didn't have to make cursory visits to the royal family there. The same was true for the next kingdom they crossed, Houtland.

As they moved north, however, the delicate sweetness of spring fled. It was still winter in this part of the world. There was no snow on the ground, but the grasses were frozen with the salty mist that rolled in from the sea. The coastline itself seemed to mellow, losing its jagged rocks in favor of pebbles, and then easing into intermittent stretches of sand. Will felt chilled to the bone and gave up his nighttime stargazing – it was often cloudy, and too cold now for him to enjoy being outside of the tent for long. How he longed for spring on the southern coast of Gaulemagne – the hot, delicious sun beating down on the beaches, warming the sand, the stretches of blue-green water, the gentle surf. Fishing for hours over the side of his boat, beneath the white canopy, cooking scallops and langoustines over fires on the beach at night with Georgia and a few local friends.

He longed for the taste of the traditional fish soup of the region called bolhabaissian stew, made with tomatoes, citrus juice, regional spices, garlic, hot peppers – no two recipes were ever the same, and the version Will liked best was spicy without the heat overwhelming the wedding of flavors. Saffron gave the dish its signature color, and Will ached for an enormous bowl, with mussels and little octopus as a garnish. "What's the food like in Eidermark?" he'd asked Georgia one day as they were served fresh venison donated by a local Hout nobleman.

Georgia had made a face. "Bland, I think," she said. "Lots of… salted fish in the winter."

At last, they reached the northern border of Houtland where they were to cross into Eidermark. A few miles from the border itself, the herdsmen and some of the guards said their goodbyes. They were taking the cattle along a different road to a fjord, where they would be loaded onto boats and taken by sea the rest of the way to Fort Valdemar, which guarded the tiny stretch of water that served as a border between Eidermark and the Northern Wastes.

Will and his retinue were headed southwest of the fort to the peninsula that housed the capital city, Gammelstrand. Before all of that, however, there was the matter of inspection. Will's retinue, with two fine milk cows in tow, were headed for the country estate of a Hout nobleman where they would be received with the proper pomp befitting Will's rank. And if a long state dinner wasn't bad enough…

Will thought it'd be dusk by the time they arrived, but the sun seemed to sink faster and faster, plunging the grasslands and bare, untilled fields into gloaming while they still had miles to go. Torches were lit, and they continued at a slower pace. Will wished they'd make camp for one last night. While a bitter wind swept in from the sea, the sky was clear. It hadn't rained for a couple of nights, a pleasant respite. One last evening under the stars would have been more than welcome.

The peak of a gentle rise revealed their destination – Schloss Ozean, home of Baron Jacobi and his family, landed gentry but low in rank. Jack must have sent someone ahead to announce their arrival, because the crushed gravel lane leading up to the bridge over the small moat was lined with villagers holding torches to light the way. The house itself was bright and alive in the night, a ship on a dark sea beckoning them to warmth and safety. As the empty carriage passed, the curtains drawn on its windows, the peasants called out greetings to Prince William Graham, welcoming him to Houtland. He felt a twinge of guilt, seeing the children waving at nothing as the conveyance rolled past. He hadn't meant to deceive them.

Will dismounted and whistled, beckoning the group of peasant children over as the rest of the retinue rolled past. "The prince is asleep," he told them behind his hand in a conspiratorial manner. "But I'll tell him you said hello." Reaching into the pouch at his hip, he gave each child a silver coin from Gaulemagne, wishing he'd brought sweets to distribute instead.

As he swung back up on Tai, he heard a woman gasp, lifting the coin her daughter had handed her into the torchlight. She bit it to test the metal and gasped again with a delighted, disbelieving laugh.

Will smiled as Georgia rode next to him. "You've just upset the local economy, you realize," she said.

"Not if they give the Baron his proper tax," Will said with a wry twist to his lips.

The manor was charming, Will had to admit. Surrounded by a shallow moat edged with grasses and reeds, the bottom two storeys were constructed of solid stone, four towers connected by sturdy walls. The final floor was half-timbered and topped with a severely peaked roof, the towers capped with conical spires. It was smaller by far than the manors of Gaulemagne, and far less ostentatious – it seemed sturdy and utilitarian on the bottom with a

bit of comfort and rustic beauty provided by the upper story, which was also graced with latticed windows.

The household streamed out into the yard, lining up on the crushed gravel, the great arched doors to the interior courtyard thrown open wide. The servants' aprons and shirts were spotless, and the Baron and his family were handsomely dressed, though their clothing lacked the extreme silhouettes and ostentatious accessories popular in Vercingetorix. Their two sons stood as respectfully as they could, though Will could see the little one was attempting to balance on the outer edges of his feet or back on the heels of his boots.

Next to the Baron was a man with short-cropped light brown hair, also well dressed in a blue waistcoat and jacket, a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles dangling from a chain around his neck. He wore a medal pinned to his lapel, the gleaming disc hanging from a maroon ribbon. It was the royal seal of Eidermark, depicting the head of a stag with a raven sitting on one antler, a heart nestled in the other. The creature's eyes were done in small red jewels that flashed in the torchlight.

The baron and his wife watched the carriage eagerly as their footmen hurried over to open the door. Will sighed as Georgia giggled and Jack shot him a look that said, *now look what you've done.*

"Baron Jacobi," Will greeted, projecting his practiced princely voice he'd been forced to develop, speaking with measured deliberateness to avoid tripping over his words or stuttering, as he often did in private. He dismounted and approached the family to stand before them. "Forgive my appearance. It was safer to travel in disguise." He slipped the helm from his head, passing it off to Georgia, and quickly removed his gloves amid the assemblage's shocked murmurs.

"Your Highness," the Baron exclaimed, eyes wide with surprise. He recovered quickly, dropping into the requisite bow, his family and household following suit. "Welcome to our home." The baroness reached out from her curtsey and tugged on her youngest son's sleeve, reminding the child to bow.

The little fair-haired creature was staring up at Will with unabashed wonder. "Mummy, didn't you say he was an *omega*? Why's he dressed like a soldier?"

"Zacaris," his mother warned as a nursemaid hustled forward to whisper in the child's ear, bending him in the proper bow.

"Think nothing of it, madam," Will said, making a graceful hand motion that allowed those gathered to stand once more. "Thank you for your warm welcome."

"Your Highness, this is Dr. Donald Sutcliffe, Royal Physician of Eidermark," the baron said, motioning to the man with the gold-rimmed glasses. The doctor bowed again, and Will inclined his head stiffly in response.

"King Hannibal sends his warmest regards," the doctor said. "He's sent me with many gifts and messages."

Will's veins barbed. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw servants leading the two dairy cows over to a man in rustic clothing, likely the manor's stablemaster. He examined the gifted animals carefully, lifting up their hooves, checking their ears and teeth. Anger bloomed, blossoming poison flowers in the garden of Will's heart. He was going to be inspected the same way, like livestock.

"Later," Will said brusquely. "My retinue needs respite."

"Of course – the feast is ready and waiting, Your Highness," the baroness promised. "I'll show you to your rooms first…?" She eyed the armor and traveling clothes he wore.

"Yes, thank you," he said, voice tight as his throat locked up, already hating the observational gaze of the Eidermark doctor.

The finest rooms in the manor had been prepared. Compared to Will's chambers back in Vercingetorix, they were small but cozy, with wood paneling and damask tapestries covering the walls, the bedclothes done in dark green with gold accents. Will noticed a pile of blankets and cushions near the fireplace in the bedchamber. "For the dogs?" he asked.

Baroness Jacobi nodded with a smile; her clasped hands rested on her skirts.

"Thank you," he said, his gratitude soothing his nerves, "for accommodating them."

"Everyone knows how much the Prince of Gaulemagne loves his dogs," she said. "Our stablemaster will see them well fed, and they can join you after the meal. And your bath is being prepared just through there." She motioned to a gleaming paneled door that opened into a tiled room with a tub and large fireplace for heating water. Hand painted tiles, he thought, covered with brightly colored flowers and birds that swirled together. He'd seen similar shapes embroidered onto the peasants' clothing.

He thanked her again and she left, maids filing into the bathroom to haul the kettles away from the fire, pouring steaming streams of water into the tub. Will sighed and wandered back to the bedchamber where Georgia was laying out his clothes. He was going to have to trade his armor for breeches and perfectly shined boots, a spotless white high-collared shirt, and a dark green split-sleeved coat trimmed with fur. The garment was fastened by a long line of silver buttons down the middle and a brown leather girdle that held it tight against his slender middle, accentuating the omegan shape of his hips. As far as finery went, it was comfortable and simple, the way he preferred to dress.

"The dog beds are a nice touch," Georgia commented as she unbuckled his breastplate.

He nodded absently, thinking about what lay just over the horizon to the north.

While Will hated to see the journey end, he had to admit that a hot bath was something he'd missed. When the water was cooled and he was clean head to toe, he got out, toweled off, and slipped on his blue quilted dressing gown. When he opened the door to the bedchamber, all the delicious heat of the soak fled his body, leaving him cold and clammy. Dr. Sutcliffe was there, speaking with Georgia, who had her irritation captured behind a mask that Will easily saw past. "And what's his appetite like?" Sutcliffe inquired just as Will stepped into the

room. “Your Highness,” he greeted, sweeping a bow. “I thought I might pay you a visit before you’d dressed. That way you can join the festivities with no concern for tomorrow.”

Before Will could answer, several attendants came with extra candles and oil lamps. Will crossed his arms tightly over his robe as the room grew steadily brighter. Jack appeared, wearing his clove-oil mask. “I know it’s sudden,” he said softly as he stood between Will and the servants arranging the room to the doctor’s liking. “But the man has a point – we might as well get it over with. Then there’s even more to celebrate tonight.”

Will’s hands clenched the fabric of his dressing gown. Humiliation burned across his cheeks, warming them, while the rest of his body felt stiff and icy.

“I’ll be right outside the door,” Jack promised.

“Georgia–”

“Will stay with you, of course.” Jack’s voice soothed where his physical touch couldn’t. It was in an alpha’s nature to protect omegas they cared for, and while Jack would never dream of putting his hands on Will, even for reassurance, Will could feel – and scent – his desire to comfort. The captain of the palace guard had always had a soft spot for Will, and that instinct to palliate had allowed Will to talk the alpha into training him to fight, throw a dagger, wield a sword, wear armor and hold a shield, to use his smaller size and greater dexterity to conquer an enemy. After Will’s parents had been killed, it was all Jack could do to try and help him heal.

“You’ve done this before and lived to tell the tale. You’ll be all right.” Jack’s eyes above the mask were softly earnest.

Will’s instincts told him to believe Jack, especially when a passing servant’s wake wafted the captain’s scent to him, the familiar mix of leather, juniper, and something that Will could only describe as a combination of sage and mint. But his rational mind bucked off the temptation to relax. It was in an omega’s nature to want comfort from an alpha just as it was in the alpha’s nature to provide solace, nature’s dichotomy of the desire to own and claim as well as soothe and nurture. But that didn’t make Jack’s words true, and Will was smart enough to know better. This knowledge wasn’t power – it was misery, as opposed to ignorant bliss.

But what could he do? The answer was nothing, except to comply.

Will let Jack lead him over to the Eidermark doctor, who wore an expression of gentleness that struck Will as patronizing more than anything else. Jack patted Will’s shoulder and left with the attendants, the door clicking shut behind him. Only Georgia, Will, and Sutcliffe remained. “If Your Highness would be so kind as to remove your gown and lie down on the bed.” He indicated the made bed, where a clean white sheet lay folded on top of the intricately stitched russet and gold coverlet. “The sheet goes on top.”

With that, the doctor turned away and stood before the fire, sorting through the leather satchel he’d brought with him. Will heard the clanking of metal and trembled. “You’ll be all right,” Georgia promised, just as Jack had.

Will nodded and untied his dressing gown. Sliding it from his shoulders, he handed it to Georgia and slipped onto the bed. She quickly helped him cover himself from neck to feet with the thin sheet.

The doctor had poured some fire-warmed water in a bowl. From his bag came a horn case, not to hold a scroll, but a piece of strong-smelling soap. Will and Georgia watched in silent confusion as the doctor meticulously washed his hands. The last time Will had been examined like this by Chilton's royal physician, and any other time he'd been seen to, hand washing had happened only after.

Next, Sutcliffe washed a metal tool with a duck-bill shaped end that Will was all-too-familiar with.

"Come down to the edge of the bed, please. You can rest your heels on the footboard… just like that." Will scooted to the end of the mattress and propped his heels as he'd been told, the sheet still draped over him. Sutcliffe adjusted the location of a lamp on a table at his elbow, and Georgia sat on the edge of the bed at Will's side. Will looked up at the tapestries bed canopy, counting the stars stitched into the fabric as Sutcliffe pushed the sheet up to Will's bent knees. He heard the pop of a cork, and then Sutcliffe rubbing his hands together. "Oil," he said gently, using slicked fingers to part Will's labia and anoint the opening. "A little pressure now."

Will closed his eyes, his mouth a brittle line. He felt Georgia take his hand, and the doctor's first two fingers sliding into him. Sutcliffe felt around, then pressed his other hand on Will's abdomen, applying pressure from both sides. "Good, good," the doctor said with soft encouragement. Will wasn't sure if it was praise for holding still or if what he felt of Will's organs seemed to please him. Fingers out. "All right, now you'll feel the speculum."

Will tensed involuntarily, expecting the metal to be cold, but the instrument had been warmed significantly by the water used to cleanse it. "Relax," Sutcliffe instructed, and Will took a breath, allowing the metal to enter him, not as deeply as the fingers. Sutcliffe adjusted the oil lamp again, spent a few moments looking, then eased the contraption out of Will's passage. He set it to the side on a table with a clean white cloth draped over it. "Almost done," he promised. "I'm going to touch the rest now. Just for a moment."

Considering Will's principal use to the king of Eidermark was the ability to have children, Will didn't see why the doctor had to gently cup his small omegan scrotum, feeling the testes within, or lift and gently examine his cock. The doctor back home hadn't given it a second thought. Nor had he parted Will's cheeks to examine his anus, pressing on the space between Will's vaginal opening and the pucker, feeling for God knew what.

"Finished down there," Sutcliffe said, standing to wash his hands again. "Thank you, Your Highness, you were the perfect patient. Just a few things left to check. You can sit up for me now, please."

Georgia squeezed his hand and Will squeezed back, folding at the waist, and quickly drawing the sheet around his hips. The doctor returned and asked Georgia to bring a lamp closer. He examined Will's nipples, felt his chest, and had him raise his arms. Drew a hand along his spine, probably looking for unnatural curves.

A renewed humiliation when Will was asked to open his mouth. He'd seen the men outside look at the cows' teeth. It was a standard step in assessing the value of livestock. Or an omega.

"All done," Sutcliffe said with another patronizing smile, daring to place a caring hand on the side of Will's neck. "Everything looks to be in order." He returned to wash his hands a final time.

Georgia immediately draped Will's dressing gown around his shoulders and he stood quickly to tie it tightly over himself. "In order but, ah… filthy, apparently," Will snapped, just to have someone to lash out against. He knew it, knew it was unbecoming, didn't care.

"Your doctors in Gaulemagne, they don't follow any kind of handwashing procedure?"

"Procedure…"

Sutcliffe turned, drying his hands, before removing a small tin of salve from his bag and applying it to his skin to prevent dryness. He smiled at Will like he was a puppy chasing his own tail. "Gammelstrand is home to the Lecter Physicians College, where I was trained – have you heard of it?"

Will shook his head as Georgia busily folded up the sheet, though he could tell she was listening intently. People noticed servants less if they were busy with something.

"Three years ago, our sovereign and his council made reproductive health a priority to increase our population over time. King Hannibal ordered an experiment in our birthing ward where all doctors and nurses were to follow a strict hand-washing procedure before treating patients. Before the procedures were in place, we lost roughly a third of omegan and beta mothers either during or in the days following labor. Pregnant alphas almost always died in childbirth, and the babies had it worse. But once the experiment began, we cut our mortality rate in half."

"Just by washing your hands?" Will furrowed his brow.

"The theory is that disease itself is invisible. It can live in the air, on the surface of the skin, even on medical instruments. Even if a doctor doesn't have any kind of malady, it's safer to simply… wash."

"I… wasn't aware there was a Physician's College in Eidermark," Will admitted.

Dr. Sutcliffe raised a finger to his lips. "Shh. The king doesn't like to have his assets well-known throughout the continent. But Eidermark is your home now. I'm sure you'll find it… different than you imagined."

Different?

"Different." Will spat the next morning, his voice sour enough for Winston to raise his head. They were confined to the luxurious carriage now, Jack insisting that Will enter Eidermark in a way that befit a prince.

At the border between Houtland and Eidermark was a solid stone fort, built up on a natural rise that gave it an unimpeded view of the ancient road that connected the kingdoms as well as the grassland surrounding it that stretched for miles to the east. The ocean roared nearby, filling the air with salt and cold mist, though the rockiness of the shore eased, revealing a natural harbor outfitted with docks used, no doubt, to supply the fort and for naval defense.

"Different," Will repeated through gritted teeth. Lining both sides of the road as they crossed the border were a series of poles driven into the ground with crossbars attached. Lashed to the stakes were bodies in various states of decomposition, their arms stretched along the crossbars. Each had a symbol Will didn't recognize painted on their foreheads – an oblong shape that resembled a massive third eye with a black iris. The corpses all had clusters of black feathers sewn into the remains of their clothing, and branches strapped to their heads to resemble, Will thought, a stag's antlers.

Will stood in the confines of the carriage and rammed his fist repeatedly into the roof of the conveyance. "STOP!" he shouted. "I order you to stop! Stop!"

The horses halted. Will threw open the intricate door with its expensive glass window and stepped out onto the road, ignoring the footman who darted forward to assist, and Jack, who rode up beside him.

The world seemed to slow, to muffle, as Will examined the mounted corpses. It had been a long time since he'd seen a dead body, and his station had spared him from most exposure to decomposition. Despite the whiffs of rot the sea breeze wafted to his nose, Will's stomach didn't turn.

Vaguely, he could hear Jack's voice, could sense Georgia beside him, but they faded further from his perception with each passing moment. Will closed his eyes and embraced the darkness behind them.

A cold, creeping feeling spread over his skin. He trembled and felt a jolt of shock through him as something appeared in the darkness.

It was a golden strand, thick and glowing, swinging like the pendulum of a clock across his darkened vision. It sliced to and fro, to and fro. Will opened his eyes, but the slice was still there, pulsing through his mind and sweeping over his vision. With each sweep, another body disappeared, and the older ones freshened, as if time were reversing before his very eyes. At last, all the bodies and stakes were gone. He could see the fort, hear the men down at the harbor. Will's mind sank even further into a place of *seeing*. Of *knowing.* His body was gone; there was only the vision.

Voices on the wind as a group of Eidermark soldiers came up along the path that led down to the harbor. With them were three prisoners being dragged along in irons, bloody and battered, pleading for their lives. Will recognized their accents as Ruthenian.

The soldiers' captain ordered the prisoners thrown to the ground where they were kept on their knees. "Enemies of Eidermark," he addressed them. "You were caught spying along our harbor, with maps of our shipping routes in your possession. And you will serve as a warning to others, your punishment dictated by our Sovereign King Hannibal Lecter the 8th." The

captain smiled, a cruel sneer. "Aren't you pleased that our sovereign himself has designed your demise? It is an honor."

A chorus of groans and cries, as if the prisoners knew what awaited them, what the king's attention to their crimes brought.

"Ruthenia is ambitious. Hungry for more land, despite the vastness of their holdings. Your eyes are bigger than your stomachs. And that's why they must be plucked out."

The prisoners screamed as the soldiers held them by their arms and legs while others came forward with daggers.

When the Ruthenian spies were blinded and exhausted from screaming, the soldiers drove three stakes into the ground and nailed on the crossbars. The unfortunates were strapped to the crosses alive before being disemboweled, wet organs tumbling free. While some of the younger soldiers bent to vomit, their older, more experienced counterparts busily painted the eye symbol on the victims' foreheads, attached the makeshift antlers, and sewed cloth stitched with black feathers directly into their skin even as they twitched with the last of their strength.

Will looked up at the sky as a great mass of black birds gathered – a swirling vortex of crows and ravens and bald-headed vultures, lured by the smell of death, ready to feast. Too many birds to be natural. Some kind of witchcraft? Or had they learned that food would always be provided here at this crossroads?

As if these spies and traitors were offered to them, the remains of the feast left to remind anyone passing into Eidermark what fate befalls those that would dare harm the kingdom of Hannibal Lecter the 8th.

"Will… Will!"

Somehow, he was back in the carriage, Georgia pressing a cold cloth to his face, Jack clasping both of his hands together and shaking them with increasing force.

"This is my design," Will whispered, his eyes fluttering open.

"He's not making sense," Georgia said, her voice tight and frightened.

"I should have made him draw the curtains," Jack growled. "It was too much for an omega…"

"I've seen worse," Will said, almost reflexively. "As you well know, Jack."

Georgia sighed and Jack looked relieved at the sassy retort. "That doesn't mean it's good for you," Jack argued.

"Because of my, ah… delicate omegan constitution?" Will asked wryly, taking the offered cup of sweet liquor from Georgia, and gulping it down to steady his nerves.

"Yes," Jack said simply. He pulled the intricately stitched curtains of the carriage, leaving only cracks for light. "You keep these shut until we're well away from…"

“Yes, captain,” Georgia promised. “Could you lead my horse? I want to stay with Will.”

Jack nodded firmly and got out, moving fast for a man of his bulk to prevent Will from laying eyes on the bodies again. Winston took the opportunity to hop back in before he shut the door. Within a few moments, the carriage was rolling again, Will and Georgia sharing the glum darkness within.

“That… display,” Will said, petting Winston rhythmically, trying to calm his heart. “That… cruelty, that savage…” He paused, catching his breath, as Georgia handed him a flask of the liquor from a pocket sewn into her dress.

“I suppose it’s meant as a warning,” Georgia tried.

Will scoffed. “It was more than a warning. It was… some kind of *ritual*. There were, ah… knife marks in the eye sockets, Georgia.”

“Gouged out?” She shivered.

He nodded. “By order of the king himself.”

“How do you know?”

“It’s… meant to look like a-a version of the Royal Seal,” he said, with a certainty he didn’t know he possessed. “Stags and ravens. King Hannibal gave… *specific* instructions f-for how they were… to be arranged. The details of how they would *die*.”

Georgia slung an arm around his shoulders and pulled him in close. He rested his head against hers. “And that’s the man I’ve been sold to,” Will murmured, his stomach roiling, tears pricking his eyes. “A man who could do something like that.”

“Vicious,” Georgia whispered.

Vicious, yes. But what Will couldn’t bear to acknowledge to himself or admit to Georgia was that he’d also found it deliciously *righteous*.

And beautiful.

Through Kindness His Throne is Made Secure

Chapter Summary

King Hannibal Lecter the 8th, sovereign of Eidermark, prepares for the arrival of his prince. The feast is life.

"Individual kennels for ten dogs," Randall says as we stroll past the structure he's designed and had built next to the stables. Workers are busily adding the finishing touches, nailing on shingles, and pounding in fence posts. "At this end is a communal space where the hounds can enter and exit as they please through a hanging door. The hinges go both ways." Randall proudly shows me how the dog doors work, and the small stove built into the wall, the grate facing out so that human hands can tend the fire and heat the room within. The freshly split boards are fragrant in the stiff breeze and the stone foundation is well-mortared and orderly.

"Well done, Randall." It comes as no surprise to me that Randall would design ingenious housing for my intended's hounds – he's confessed to me on many occasions that he feels like a predatory beast trapped in the body of a young man. He understands animals, can adopt their point of view, is privy to their whims and hungers and instincts. He may be my personal secretary and most loyal attendant, but what I enjoy most about him is his compulsion to tear his prey apart and revel in their screams.

He is a gifted engineer and is at work on an articulated suit that gives him the silhouette, teeth, and claws of the savage creature he sees himself as. I've built him a workshop near the armory and bestowed a generous allowance for materials. I'm curious what will happen when he finishes his creation.

My praise glows across his face, as it should, coming from his sovereign. Additionally, his loyalty to me is further sealed by my nurturing of his desires to claw, bite, kill. "Thank you, Your Majesty."

"And the other preparations?" I turn now towards the castle, taking a moment to enjoy the way the setting sun stains the red bricks a further shade of scarlet, the ornamental sandstone rendered glowing velvet. Two swans cut through the waters of the moat that surrounds it. In the short interim when the Lecter family was forced from the throne by the Triumvirate and the traitors occupied the palace designed and begun by my grandfather and finished by my father, they let the servants soil the waters with garbage and human waste rather than dispose of it properly. It took years to dredge and clean. I have it cleaned yearly, and just finished lining portions of it with rock for filtration.

The moat was just the beginning. The mismanagement of the rebels not only damaged Castle Lecter but weakened Eidermark in every way. Just as I have dredged the moat, repaired the walls, gutted, and redecorated every chamber, I have repaired my lands with

governance, strategic alliance, and a reign marked by humanist reform coupled with an iron fist.

The castle looks just as it did when I was a child. The gardens replanted, the grounds maintained, the servants' quarters and barracks filled with the fittest and most loyal of my subjects, the fortifications repaired, my home's splendor and strength restored. Eidermark restored.

But there were things taken from me during the revolution that cannot be restored. They are lost and gone forever.

I can hear the screams behind the doors in my memory palace – a mental recreation of Castle Lecter where I keep the specters of everything beautiful and horrible I've encountered in this lifetime. But I let Randall's response draw me out again, a lifeline to the present. "The prince's suite and the rooms for his people were finished as of yesterday morning," he says. "To the letter, all of your specifications fulfilled. Have you chosen a menu for supper on the night of his arrival?" Randal inquires as we cross the drawbridge into the courtyard.

"Not until the date is certain." Everything must be perfectly fresh. The food in Gaulemagne is legendary, and I have one cook on staff whose mother was an expatriate and taught him all she knew. I will always honor the humbler fare of my native land, but it is in my nature as a host – and an alpha courting a mate – to provide only the best, something that will remind him of home, and send a message that I do not wish for him to forget his origins entirely. "Thank you, Randall."

"Of course, sire."

"Take some time for yourself," I tell him as the guards step aside and open the door into the long stone corridor connecting the two largest rooms on either end of this wing. While other palaces are designed to open into a vast front hall and impress with wasted space, I've lined this passage with portraits of my family, including a massive slab of granite built into the masonry, chiseled with my lineage as far back as recorded history can provide, the names decorated with gold leaf. I want there to be no mistake that this is Castle Lecter, and no one will ever take it from us again.

As I pass, I glance at the remaining space on the granite, blank and waiting for my heirs. I close my eyes and see the golden letters form next to my name, a line connecting us in matrimony. *Prince William James Graham of the House of Beauregard-Devereaux.*

Pleased anticipation surges through me and I temper it as best I can, allowing myself some time at the harpsichord to metabolize my hopes. My advisers find me halfway through the minuet, but they know better than to interrupt. When the piece is finished, I attend to matters of state. We strategize endlessly in preparation for the inevitable – Ruthenia's attempt to annex Traedenis and gain access to their soft beaches and natural ports. Traedenis is our closest ally and holds all easy access to the waters on the southern coast of the Austmarian Sea, leaving Ruthenia with miles of useless, rocky coastline with boulders sharp enough to gouge through the hull of the strongest ship or slice a man's feet to the bone.

And then, there's the matter of the Northern Wastes, and the nomads who wander it with their herds of reindeer. Our spies have sent back tales of a man called the Dragon; a tribal leader who is attempting something unprecedented – uniting all of the nomads under one banner. His purpose is uncertain, but at the same time, it is no mystery. Who among us wouldn't want to encroach on the southlands, to enjoy the bounty of vegetation, to leave the tundra behind?

I am being apprised of the mining conditions in the Vyndessal region, where the richest veins of angel's blood ore streak heavenly silver through the earth, when Randall creeps in and discreetly whispers in my ear. "Dr. Sutcliffe has returned."

I let Lord Tobias finish his report on the music academy before excusing myself. I may be the sovereign ruler of Eidermark, but if I do not tolerate rudeness in others, it would be inexcusable not to hold myself to the same standard.

I find Sutcliffe in the anteroom of my chambers, still in his riding clothes, enjoying a cup of warm fortified wine. The winds have stirred up and I can see drizzle caught on the fur trim of his jacket. He rises and bows to me. "Your Majesty."

I can barely contain my curiosity but force myself to nod in response before claiming the chair opposite his in the pool of warmth and light thrown by the stately hearth, the fireplace flanked on either side by marble pillars, a gilt-framed portrait of my great-grandmother, Grazina Lecter, staring down at us. "You've completed your task?" I ask mildly, as if my curiosity wasn't tickling my brain into a heated twist.

"I have." He smiles, leaning back in his chair. "The prince is a virgin, as promised."

Mine.

A surge of molten, possessive lust flows through me, pulsing my cock for a heated moment. I will it away. Mastery of my alpha nature has served me in innumerable ways – unlike other rulers, I am not a warmonger, hungry for more land and power at the expense of everything else. I am not Abel of Ruthenia, who would drown thousands of men just to launch one warship out of his perilous, rock-strewn harbors, just to say that Ruthenia has a presence in the Austmarian sea.

"And?" I say, betraying nothing. Sutcliffe is one of the finest doctors our medical college has ever produced, but there's a certain smugness to him I don't care for. He seems like the kind of man whose loyalty could be bought.

"He's in excellent health. His mother was a beta and only produced three children, but his paternal aunt, as you know, is Louise, wife of the Earl of Burbridge in Lothien, an omega who has birthed 8 healthy children."

"I'm aware. The Earl of Chilton was sure to mention it during negotiations."

"Hips are a little narrow," Sutcliffe says ruefully. "But he hasn't reached his 22nd year just yet – he may have finished maturation by then." He smiles into his glass of wine, a sort

of licentious twist to his lips. “I think you’ll be very pleased, sire. He is well-formed and suited to your tastes, I should think—once you’ve broken him in a little.”

Rage reddens the corners of my vision. I imagine impaling Sutcliffe on a spike or carving his face open to exaggerate that infuriating smile of his, just to listen to him choke to death on his own blood. “Are you referring to his demeanor?”

“Demeanor can be changed,” Sutcliffe assures me, as if his words are soothing. “The important parts are intact and functional.”

“You found him willful.” This is not a question – I’ve heard rumors already, and I have copies of the pamphlets he’s allegedly written.

“Your Majesty,” he backpedals, “you know I support the changes you’ve made to the laws regarding omegan rights. But not everyone in Eidermark does, and I’m sure your advisers have told you that not having a handle on your fiancé will be seen as a… weakness, shall we say.”

I nod. He’s not wrong, but I still want to kill him.

Sutcliffe tells me what he learned from speaking with other members of the prince’s retinue, and a few words he was able to share with the boy’s most loyal attendant, called Georgia. “Apparently, he insisted on dressing as a guard and riding most of the way here,” Sutcliffe reveals. “With a comfortable conveyance available, for what reason I couldn’t tell you. You should have seen the way he looked at me during the exam – like he wanted to tear my throat out with his teeth!”

Well, now, the prince and I may have never met, but we already have something in common.

I press him for further information, whatever he can remember – the prince’s preferences for food and drink, clothing, leisure. These morsels of information only serve to inflame my hunger. However, I now have a menu for Randall to plan.

I have dinner of my own planned for tonight and thank Sutcliffe for his work and riding home so quickly to deliver his report. Now, as the moon rises, I prepare for the feast.

The castle is quiet as I descend the winding stair into the damp regions below the main floor, settling in for the night. At the end of the stair, lit only by torchlight, is the studded door to the dungeons and the Lecter family catacombs. The guards here are expecting me and unlock the door at the sound of my footsteps approaching. I enter, followed by three of the four, the final left behind to make sure the entrance is manned. Beyond is a wide underground room, enclosed by rough-hewn rock on all sides with a smooth, slabbed floor. Here is where the bodies of my forebears were prepared for their final rest. A small but graceful arch on one side leads into this maze of resting places carved into the living rock. The other door is a barred gate, which must be unlocked. Down another pitch-black passage, the darkness alleviated by the guards’ sputtering torches, and through another gate. Now we’ve reached the dungeon proper, with its barred cells and interrogation chamber.

As soon as I step between the rows of cells, the dank air is filled with groans, screams, cries, pleas for mercy. I have captive several Ruthenian spies, two nomads caught on the wrong side of the strait, and several traitors who supported the Triumvirate's overthrow.

My prince is on his way, and while I know that pleasing gods that may or may not exist is anything from tricky business to a pointless exercise, I want tonight to be special.

Baron Petras Kolnas has languished in a cell for twelve years for his crimes against Eidermark. Against my parents, King Andreas and Queen Simonetta, his rightful sovereigns. Against Princess Mischa, horrors unimaginable. Against me. One third of the cursed Triumvirate, traitor to the crown and Eidermark herself, sentenced to death at the king's pleasure.

I decide when and how. And tonight is the night.

Kolnas stirs from his makeshift bed when he sees me peering through the bars of his cage. "Your Majesty," he says, prostrating himself on the filthy floor, touching his head to the slimy stones below. The floor of the cell is littered with tiny bones – he's been eating rats when he can catch them. "Your Majesty, please, I beg you, I beg you for mercy!" He raises his manacled hands in a gesture of prayer. "Vladis Grutas and Enrikas Dorlich, sire, they-they tricked me, they promised they would spare the royal family and merely exile them, please, Your Majesty, I-I beg your forgiveness, I beg for mercy…!"

"Your only crime, then, was treason? Not murder?" I pretend to think this over. "Wouldn't the sentence be the same?"

"Yes, Your Majesty, yes – I know I must die. I beg you, sire, please – let it be by legal execution, a beheading with a trained swordsman–"

"So that it might be over quickly?" I step closer to the cell, reaching up to touch the bars that separate us. The cool metal is soothing, its strength a comfort. Not because I'm afraid of his escape – they represent my power over his fate. He has stared at these bars for twelve years and wished over and over to be strong enough to bend them. They are infused with his suffering, his yearning for freedom. I can feel it against my skin, and it is delicious. "You beg for mercy, Lord Kolnas. There is no mercy. We make mercy, manufacture it in the parts that have overgrown our basic animal instincts as man left the forest to build boats and castles. We make murder, too. It matters only to us. You know too well that you possess all the elements to make murder. Perhaps mercy, too, but murder you understand uncomfortably well."

Kolnas slowly lifts his head. Using the chains that have him shackled to the wall, he pulls himself to his feet, tries to straighten his shoulders and look like a shadow of the proud man that ruled Eidermark for nine years with his co-conspirators. "I could say the same thing about you," he hisses through his browned and broken teeth, spittle flying between them and landing on his scraggly beard.

I smile. "Indeed. And you'll experience my understanding firsthand tonight."

He collapses with a languishing cry and a rattle of chains. “No, no, no,” he begs. “No, no, no…!”

“Didn’t I chant the same prayer when they came for my sister?”

A hand settles on my shoulder, light as a tiny bird landing there before increasing in comforting weight. I smell Chiyoh before I see her, taking in the scent of polished leather, whetstones, and a hint of the jasmine-scented oil she uses on her hair and skin. Captain of my guard, sent to protect me by my aunt Murasaki, queen of the small island kingdom of Yamato, a land far away beyond Ruthenia. Chiyoh fought at my side when I reclaimed Eidermark and has been my most trusted companion ever since. Steady and unwavering, petite but impossibly strong, she is the human embodiment of angel’s blood.

“Everything is ready,” she says, leaning forward to speak into my ear.

I nod. “The time has come, Lord Kolnas.” I must raise my voice to be heard over his begging screams.

The guards produce the key to the cell and haul him out, dragging him further down into the dungeon where he will be stripped, washed, and shaved. I leave them to it and unlock another door near the interrogation chambers, a small, unassuming entrance considering what mysteries lay beyond.

Chiyoh and I enter the cave we’ve discovered deep beneath Castle Lecter. Chiyoh lights a torch with the one she’s carrying and hands it to me. Together, we travel through a narrow passage before the cave opens into a forked branch. I take the right-hand path to a small cavern with a thick slab of carpet on the ground to protect our feet from the living stone. Randall is there waiting for me, wearing his black robe tied with a blood-red sash. “Good evening, sire.”

“Good evening, Randall.”

The boy helps me undress, carefully unbuttoning the high gold-stitched neck of my collar and working his way down my green velvet tunic, its sleeves lined with dark orange brocade. I trade it for simple black robes. He helps me slip out of my footwear, replacing my shoes with soft black boots. Over my head now, settled across my shoulders, is a mantle of black fur sewn with plumes of black feathers. I am nude beneath my robe. He ties the sash expertly and settles the headdress over my hair, cinching up the black leather laces that keep it in place before lowering the stag skull mask over my face.

I wait for him to put on his own skull mask, and we exit the small passage, headed for the other tine of the fork. This opens into a vast cavern, studded with stalactites, lit by braziers and torches. Chiyoh follows, but only to observe. She has no interest in the Mysteries.

In the center of the cavern is a tall slab of stone, upon which I have raised a statue carved from black granite. It is a graven image, if you ask the followers of the Book, but I commissioned the most talented sculptor in Eidermark to make it. Graven, yes, but also incomparable in aesthetic craftsmanship.

The statue depicts Moragnethe, the Thirteenth Angel of the Eiriene, the lost daughter of the moon goddess. Ancient warriors of Eidermark once had her aspect tattooed on their bodies, adding more feathers to her wings the more people they killed. From what I've been able to uncover through my work recording oral legends told from generation to generation in the remote Vyndessal region, Moragnethe has existed in human ceremonial magic and strange worship since Animist times, when the spirits of crows, ravens, and vultures coalesced into the same humanoid figure, giving her their wings. When the Old Religion found her, she was seen as an angel of war and death, and the stories wove her in with the Eiriene, their darker sister, whose powers allowed her to control the carrion birds, which she used to dispense justice against those that would harm women or omegas. She was embraced by death cults and witches, and her worship was outlawed centuries ago.

But this is a new Eidermark. My Eidermark, where there is a clear separation between religion and state. Eidermarks are free to practice the religion of their choice, or none, one of my many reforms enacted once I regained the throne. That being said, my official religion is that of the Book, and I do attend mass from time to time to keep up appearances. Moragnethe worship is still more than taboo. Mostly because of the human sacrifice, I'd imagine.

My coven is gathered beneath Moragnethe's outstretched stone wings. They are dressed as Randall is, as I am, though I wear the thick mantle that designates my status. Eleven of them. Now that we have joined, the sacred number is achieved. At our approach they turn in reverent silence, the empty eyes of their deer skull masks staring blankly at me. The air crackles with anticipation that is tempered only by the prayerful quiet.

On the stone floor at the base of the rock that bears the statue is another rock stained with blood and soaked with tears, infused with screams. Screaming echoes beautifully in the cavern, and I enjoy it more every time. Especially tonight, as Chiyoh drags the prisoner, naked, washed, and chained hand and foot, towards the bloodstained rock. She forces him to kneel and locks the chain between his arms around a ring in the floor, making him hug the boulder on his knees, his bare back exposed.

Chiyoh leaves. This is my coven's cue to begin.

Baron Kolnas's pleas and screams and curses are all but drowned out by the singing and chanting of Moragnethe's hymn. It begins quietly, increasing in volume and fervor. Now, as it reaches its pitch, some members of the coven shriek back whatever our victim utters in a discordant echo supported by the disordered harmony of the hymn. I stand and watch until the hymn ends with all of us opening our throats to scream at the stone ceiling of the cave.

I join them at last, in this final act. And in my scream is all the anguish and impotent rage I still carry.

I couldn't save my parents. I couldn't save Mischa.

Buddish the Mad, a man allegedly touched by Moragnethe, comes to me now in the hushed silence, broken only by Kolnas's resigned weeping and murmured prayers to the One God. Buddish is my high priest, says he can hear the angel speak to him, showing him demons in disguise and granting him her blessing. He once roamed Bittersea, murdering these alleged demons in her name. Fleeing capture, he came to Eidermark and was arrested trying to take

another victim. I put him in my dungeon because I wanted to understand what compelled him to kill and display the bodies of his victims in such an unusual way – their backs flayed open, and the skin stretched up like an angel's wings.

Officially, he was executed for his crimes. In truth, he lives in the caves and presides over the ceremonies.

Buddish removes his stag's skull mask and hands it to another member of our coven. He draws an Eidermark blade from his belt, made, of course, of angel's blood. Holding his hands up to the statue, he addresses it as the candlelight plays over the intricate carving. The angel's face is shrouded in a veil beneath a hood, carved so perfectly I almost think the cloth could move. She wears armor over her robes. A medallion hangs from her neck depicting an eye. Besides presiding over everything from war to death to the eating of the dead, the witches imbued her with the powers of otherworldly sight.

"Great and terrible Moragnethe, daughter of Lumeria. You who are the queen of crows, mistress of ravens, commander of vultures, Our Lady of the Crossroads – we humbly offer this sacrifice in your name. Make us worthy in your sight. Grant us your blessings. Imbue us with your might, so that we may thrive, crush our enemies, and enchant us with all the beauty and art and horror of everything this world has to offer."

My coven murmurs their own prayers for a moment. Normally I listen to discern their secrets, if they have any I can use for leverage, should it be needed.

But tonight is different. I do find myself addressing the universe itself.

I want him to love me. Not in spite of what I am, but because of it.

I find myself wishing, like a child on a falling star, that it will be more than a royal match, a marriage of status, an alliance, a way to secure heirs and enjoy fatherhood.

I chastise myself silently as the prayers float through the fire-stricken air, mingling with the baron's whimpering. Folly to wish for what is so impossible. I might as well pray for my family to crawl out of their graves, whole and restored.

I'm grateful when my thoughts are dispersed by Kolnas's first agonized shriek as Buddish flays open the flesh of his back. Others bring two poles with circular bases that they place on either side of the sacrifice. These poles have thin ropes that run through metal eyelets at the tops. At the ends of these ropes hang razor sharp angel's blood hooks. As Buddish flays the baron alive, he carefully peels back the lengths of bloody skin, one side after the other, and passes the still-warm flaps into the hands of his coven brothers and sisters, who pierce it with the hooks. Others gently pull on the other ends of the ropes, drawing the flesh up to mirror the spread wings of our image of Moragnethe.

The screams and pleas slowly fade but renew when Buddish the Mad begins sawing into Kolnas's ribs, severing them from the spine one at a time. Wrenching them out of his way with meaty cracks, he reaches in with one crimson hand and uses the knife expertly with the other. Two more coven members approach, bearing an angel's blood platter by its handles. The delicate beauty of the silver-blue metal is splattered with blood as Buddish removes

Kolnas's lungs, still full of his last breath of air, and places them on the platter. Next comes the liver and the kidneys.

"What else do you require?" Randall murmurs to me from beneath his stag's skull mask.

"This is sufficient," I say.

"It is done!" Randall calls. Buddish stands and bows to me.

The traitor's body is unchained and carried on the shoulders of six of the coven. Two carry the plate of organs. One bears a torch, holding it so that I can easily find my footing. The procession passes out through another part of the cave on an upward incline. We move in total silence; occasionally I hear the blood dripping from Kolnas and splattering against the floor of the cavern.

At last, we find another door that signals the end of the passage. It opens in the side of a grassy hill. We are in the country now, the lights of the capital behind us.

On top of the knoll is a large, flat stone carved with the symbol of the Eye surrounded by feathered wings. We bear the sacrifice up to the altar, where an angel's blood statue of a stag's head has been bolted into the living rock, topped with an enormous rack of intricate antlers. It has been cleaned since the last sacrifice, the beautiful metal native to my homeland glimmering in the moonlight. My coven impales the body on the sword-sharp tines, pressing it down to ensure it cannot be dragged off.

"This we have done in the name of the great and fearsome Moragnethe," Buddish says by way of conclusion. "We invite her minions, the carrion-eaters, to consume this feast and seal our promise of devotion to the Thirteenth Angel."

Again, the smattering of murmured prayers. Later, trusted members of my coven will move under the cover of darkness, retrieving the body and placing it in its final resting place – impaled on similar antlers over the bridge leading to my palace, where they will be skeletonized by scavengers.

Down we go now, bringing with us only the plate of organs. We follow a stone path into the woods to a large thatch-roofed, half-timbered building, constructed like the mead halls of old. Within, everything is made ready – the long table set, the fires lit, the decorative centerpieces arranged. Randall and I take the organs, allegedly for me to make a private burnt offering to the angel, my prerogative as king. We go out a side door, and then immediately enter again through the kitchen entrance.

It's time to cook supper. My coven deserves a good meal after the ceremony. If any of them wonder about the menu – lung and loin in a delicate wine sauce, beef and kidney pie, and delicately fried calf's liver – they never do so aloud. I do all the cooking of the main dishes myself, Randall handling the rest. It is symbolic, a king preparing food for his subjects, a perceived demonstration of humility.

Within two hours, the guests have removed their masks and are merry with wine, laughing and talking together. At the table, we give thanks to our angel, and dig in.

Buddish the Mad raises his goblet and toasts, “To the king!”

“LONG LIVE THE KING!” my coven echoes.

I smile, watching them drink. I pick up my knife and fork, and cut into the exceedingly tender lung, raising the fork to my mouth. Succulent. Perfect. I’ve outdone myself. Kolnas is delicious, and so is vengeance.

“Another delectable meal, Your Majesty!” Baroness Komeda declares, the coven breaking into applause.

I lift my goblet and smile. “The feast is life. You put the life in your belly, and you live.”

“The feast is life!” they toast me again. “Eat it and live!”

In Secret Kept, In Silence Sealed

Chapter Summary

> Will arrives in Eidermark, and finds it's nothing like he imagined. And, in some ways, it's exactly as he feared.

Will had been forced to spend the last two days of the journey trapped in the royal carriage, away from fresh air and anything remotely stimulating. He and Georgia whiled away the hours as they could with intermittent visits from the dogs, but his impatience grew with every mile they covered. Part of it was a desire to see more of the Eidermark countryside, which, as they traveled inland, continued to please Will, much to his surprise. It was filled with glassy streams, stretches of forest just now waking to spring, and rolling acres of fertile fields. It was sowing season, and Will amused himself by watching the peasants hurry across the tilled earth to catch a glimpse of his entourage, the children shouting and racing one another.

If he was lucky, Jack would let him stop and distribute the goodwill gifts he'd brought – coins, sweets, and strings of colored glass beads threaded through with gold dust. While the common people were delighted with these trinkets, and offered spring flowers, beautifully embroidered handkerchiefs, or bottles of mead in return, it became clear to him that the working class in Eidermark was typically ruddy-cheeked and well fed – far less desperate than the average villagers in Gaulemagne, for whom a coin could change their entire lives. That the Eidermarks had welcoming gifts for *him* was a shock.

"Eidermark prospers, it seems," Georgia said, after they'd been shut up in the carriage again after a stop in a charming village full of stone cottages with tidy thatched roofs.

"Wish I could've tried that rhubarb cake," Will grumbled, tossing off his dark gold fencing cape and opening the top buttons of his doublet, letting his neck breathe.

"Jack's right," Georgia chided him, holding up a handkerchief Will had been gifted. It was constructed of masterfully intricate lace that flowered out from the center in a petal pattern. "Poison isn't out of the question. The enemies of Eidermark or Gaulemagne would be more than happy to see you dead, and the dowry reclaimed."

"You're always so… *comforting*, aren't you?" Will snarked, leaning his elbow on the windowsill and peering out at the rolling fields. It had begun to rain again. Beautiful as the countryside was, Will was tired of everything being damp, especially the dogs' fur. "Does it ever stop raining here?"

"God's teeth, this is beautiful," Georgia murmured, examining the handkerchief. "To think, a farmer's wife made this in her spare time." She sighed with a contented smile. "I'm telling

you, Eidermark prospers. You should be pleased. None of the people here seem ready to storm the palace with torches and pitchforks."

"Not like Gaulemagne," Will muttered darkly.

"Exactly."

Will flipped through a book he'd already read twice before abandoning it on the cushion beside him. "It's… strange," he mused as they passed over what Will assumed was another well-made stone bridge. Despite the rain, he saw three boys in a small boat fishing the wide river beneath a willow tree, floating between its caressing boughs. "I mean… you saw the bodies at the border."

Georgia nodded, folding up the handkerchief carefully.

"I thought that a-a king capable of that kind of cruelty would…" He chewed his lower lip a second, wrinkling his forehead.

"Rule his subjects with cruelty too?"

Will nodded. "I expected…" He sighed. "I don't know."

"I see what you mean," Georgia agreed, clambering across the seat to sit next to him. Grabbing up a deck of playing cards, she shuffled them with deft hands as the carriage bounced along. "The way people in Gaulemagne talk about Eidermark makes it seem like it isn't much better than the Northern Wastes. That the people here are barely more than savages."

Will felt the golden pendulum in his mind spin in a tight circle, like a top. It made him dizzy for a moment. "That's what he wants us to think," he murmured, watching the budding trees through the rain-splattered glass.

"Why would you want your kingdom to be known as a backwater?" Georgia retorted. "With no culture, no influence?"

"I don't know," Will said. "But I'm sure I'll find out one way or another." He played with the tassels on his cape as Georgia shuffled the deck again. "Doesn't change what he did. Doesn't… make it go away. The… cruelty of it, t-the warning, the message. Brutal." Icy claws suddenly gripped his heart, and Will found himself blinking back threatening tears. He remembered all too well how easily he'd been able to slip into the point of view that made such atrocities justified. Found them beautiful, the trespassers' deaths elevated to art. It had felt *good*, sliding smoothly into the beating heart of violence. Like the taste of something that, if he wasn't careful, could become an addiction that would consume him entirely, the way opium-smoking had ruled Count Umber of Massalia, Will's second cousin by marriage. Will had seen the man wither away to nothing, smaller each time Will visited, until, unable to stand being shackled, he threw himself from a seaside cliff, dashing his head open on the rocks below.

Georgia put her arm around him, despite his rigid, unresponsive posture. After a few moments, he relented, and rested his head on her shoulder, breathing in the familiar scent of citrus oil she used on her hair. “You’re afraid he’s going to be brutal with you, too,” she said, “since you know he’s capable of it.”

Will had been so disgusted by his own reaction to the skeletal scarecrows that he hadn’t even considered it. This brought a fresh panic, bright and bitter, that made his lunch roil in his stomach. “He could be, if he wanted to,” Will said, trying to keep the tears in his eyes out of his voice. But when she reached over to hold his hand, the dam broke, and he had to breathe through a threatening sob. “There’s… nothing, ah… nothing I can do about it.”

“Write to the Regent?” she suggested, though her tone revealed she knew how pointless that would be.

Will shook his head, accepting the offer of the intricately stitched handkerchief and wiping his eyes with it. “If a man wants to beat his dog, he’s within his rights, because it’s his animal,” he said, voice as fragile as ice over a street puddle. “It’s not… illegal to be a monster. Just in *poor taste*.” His sorrow braided with the lifelong, impotent rage of being born an omega, a fury that had been with him with the inevitable constancy of his own shadow. “He can do whatever he wants to me. There’s nothing…”

“I know,” Georgia said. There was nothing else to say, no other comfort to offer. “I know.”

The night before they were to reach Eidermark’s capital, the wind howled across the fields, pelting their tents with blasts of icy rain. The next morning, however, dawned bright, the sun burning up the mist within an hour of rising. A gentle southern wind brought gusts of spring that had yet to take hold this far north. It wasn’t far to Gammelstrand, and the retinue was allowed a later start. Will still rose early, gripped with dread. He and Georgia distracted themselves by giving the dogs a bath and brushing their coats, shining the buckles on their leather collars, and making a mess of themselves in the process.

When Will saw Jack approach, his heart balled itself up like a fist in his chest. He stood, letting Max trot off, the sun glinting on his shiny black and tan coat. “It’s time for you to have a similar treatment,” Jack grinned, showing off his gapped teeth, not wearing his mask since they were outside.

Of course, *he* was happy the journey was at its end. He was probably desperate to sit down and write a letter to Bella. Will wondered if he thought of her like she was an object he owned, free to do with as he chose. He never spoke of her that way, only with a fawning reverence. Will had met her several times, and found her intelligent, quiet but imbued with a kind of graceful strength that Jack deferred to, even as an alpha. Even though she hadn’t given him a child yet, he so clearly valued her.

Love. A complete acceptance of the other, an embracing of souls. Not to say that they never quarreled, or it was the kind of romance from an ancient ode. No, their relationship had all the flaws and nuances that two human beings brought to the union. But Will had always admired them from afar. It was acceptance, and it was also a mutual respect.

A love Will shouldn't expect, shouldn't even think about, much less hope for.

Will and Georgia followed Jack back to the prince's tent, where a small wooden tub full of hot water waited. It was tiny compared to the baths he was used to back home, but what could one expect while traveling?

Several attendants had been told to stay and assist, but Will ordered them all out, save Georgia. The tent was quiet, though they were serenaded by the cheerful voices of the retinue, the servants and guards in high spirits due to the weather and the fact that once Will was settled in, they could go home to Gaulemagne. Tonight, they would sleep under a roof, warmed by fireplaces, bellies full of the King of Eidermark's hospitality.

Will wondered if he would sleep at all, or if…

"Did you ever open the king's gift?" Georgia asked, breaking him from his dread-soaked reverie. "The things his physician brought you?"

"No," Will said as she poured water over his hair, rinsing out the scented soap he'd brought from the southern coast of Gaulemagne, where the lavender fields turned the sun-drenched countryside to amethyst. Chilton had sent bags of the stuff, bunches of the dried flowers tied together with string and packed into burlap sacks. One of the best places to ride in the retinue was behind the lavender wagon.

"Dr. Sutcliffe told me there's a portrait inside," she said, and handed him the small fingernail brush before settling next to him to shave off the little bit of stubble he'd accrued since the Houtland border. "Curious?"

"No," Will retorted.

"Hold still," she scolded, and he complied. They didn't speak until he'd rinsed his face in the steaming water. "Don't you want to know what to expect?"

"Does it matter?" Will snapped, then sighed. "I'm sorry, it's just–"

"I know," she comforted, packing up his shaving things. "And I suppose it doesn't. Matter, that is." She handed him a large towel, his dressing gown draped over her other arm. Will got out of the tub, stepping onto the soft rug next to it, and took the towel from her, drying off a bit before slipping into his robe. "But aren't you curious to see what he sent?" she asked, handing him a comb.

"I know what he sent," Will retorted, ruffling the towel over his hair. "It's what any alpha would send. Let's see, uhm… so, there's the portrait, small, probably in a gilded frame, probably looks nothing like him. And then there'll be love poems that someone else wrote, and jewelry. Nothing too valuable, but a-a promise of what's to come. And he'll expect me to be wearing it when I arrive. So he knows I'm not *wild,* that I belong to someone. A collar for the dog, just like…" He shook his head, pressing his face into the towel. No use getting upset again.

“Might be made of angel’s blood,” she teased, retrieving the oval bent-wood box Sutcliffe had delivered, its surface painted red and decorated with stylized tulips of white and yellow.

“I don’t care,” he said flatly, dragging the comb through his wet hair.

“Can I look?”

“Be my guest.”

Georgia opened the box as Will put on his long shorts, using the laced ribbon to cinch them snugly against his waist. The undergarment was brand new, one of several sent along with them by Chilton with the expectation they would be worn once Will arrived. He had to admit that the silk was very fine, though he despised the intention.

“No jewelry,” Georgia reported as she set things on the table next to Will’s waiting cup of tea. “You were right about the portrait, though.”

Intrigued, Will glanced her way. She held the little frame against her chest with a mischievous grin. “You said you didn’t want to see.”

“I don’t,” he insisted. “But you said no jewelry…?”

“A book,” she reported, lifting it from the box. “And a lovely pen and inkwell.”

Will draped the towel over his shoulders and came to her side. Georgia hugged the little portrait to her chest. “No peeking. You said you didn’t want to!”

“I told you I don’t give a damn what he looks like,” he insisted. Yet he found himself picking up the book. It was a history of the 1290 Ruthenian invasion, chronicling the war from Eidermark’s perspective. Will had never heard of the author, which was strange, considering he read every book he could get his hands on. Inside the book was a thin strip of canvas, backed with leather and beautifully embroidered, topped with a red silken tassel. It was stitched with the outline of a black stag, a raven perched on one antler, a heart cradled in the other. Figures from the Lecter family crest. Will’s crest, soon enough, when matrimony drew him into its shadow, his own parentage unimportant as he was absorbed into another family, his name blacked out.

These dark thoughts were interrupted, however, when Will noticed which page the bookmark lay against. It was a beautifully illuminated illustration of General Arethusa of Gaulemagne leading her armies against the invaders, a gilded halo glowing behind her head. According to legend, she’d been given visions by the One God, and granted the power to organize and lead the common people of Gaulemagne to protect their borders. A female omega, barely sixteen years old, had stepped in to save her country.

Will slowly closed the book and looked at the pen and inkwell. The nib was made of angel’s blood – he could tell by the blue-silver luster and the metal’s lack of weight coupled with perfect balance. It was topped with a raven feather and was decorated with another stag’s head, this one with small rubies for eyes. A worthy gift, to be sure, along with a matching inkwell. This was not a trinket or a token of vapid flattery.

Before he could fully process the meaning behind the gifts, Jack pushed aside the tent flap, wearing his mask again. “You haven’t dressed yet, have you?” he said as a way of greeting. Seeing Will still in his dressing gown, he followed with, “Good. The Regent had specific instructions for your arrival in Gammelstrand.” Jack withdrew a small chest from under his arm and set it on the table after Georgia cleared it of the gifts, slipping them back into the bent wood box.

“Instructions…?”

“Your clothes.” Jack patted the top of the chest. “We’re mounting up soon, so don’t be too long. But…” this he directed at Georgia. “Take your time, if it’s needed.”

Georgia nodded, drawing her hair over her shoulder, and fiddling nervously with it. Jack left, tying the tent flap shut behind him.

Will opened the case and cursed. Inside was a ridiculously ornate tunic made of gossamer, celestial fabric, a deep turquoise. It was beaded and embroidered all over, the ornamentation concentrated at the neckline, around the large bell sleeves, and the long hem. A thick gold damask patterned cummerbund was tucked beneath, complete with laces in the back to cinch it tightly to his waist. All of this was to be paired with bronze ankle-length breeches and a pair of delicate sandals, the tooled leather held together by thin gold chains and clasps.

“You’ll freeze to death!” Georgia exclaimed. “Doesn’t your cousin know how cold and wet it is here in the spring?”

“My comfort isn’t his concern,” Will muttered darkly, tossing the garments back in the box. “Jack?” he called out the tent flap.

Jack returned a few moments later. Will held up the tunic and Georgia showed him the shoes. “No,” is all Will said.

“Yes,” Jack said, scratching the back of his head ruefully, fingertips rasping over his close-cropped curls. “I was asked to give my solemn vow.”

They argued for half an hour until Will gave up. Jack had given him liberties on the journey here that Chilton wouldn’t have approved of. But on this point, he was firm.

And so, Will got dressed. It was worse than he thought. The neckline was wide, the fabric gathered at the points of his shoulders and then draped down, leaving his arms bare almost to the elbow before the sleeves began. The front draping plunged down between his pectorals, exposing his neck, collarbone, and the line of his sternum. This, coupled with the cinched cummerbund, was all designed, he knew, to flaunt his omeganess, to tantalize an alpha with his exposed neck, the rounded curve of his mating gland, and the flare of his hips in contrast to his constricted waist and lower back. It invited objectification while the materials and colors kept it out of tawdry territory.

Georgia laced the cummerbund as loosely as she could, and then retrieved the final object in the box – an intricate gold diadem inlaid with large aquamarine stones and accented with diamonds as befit a prince.

She slowly lowered it over Will's head, the largest gem resting in the center of his forehead and arranged his curls to accommodate it. A delicate thing, but it still weighed heavily on Will's head.

The villages that lined the great road became more frequent until it seemed that they had found discernible civilization, leaving the fields behind for houses and taverns, stables, and markets, and numerous weaponsmiths, metal workers, and forges spewing smoke and sparks into the cloudless spring sky. When they were close, Jack had Georgia leave Will alone in the carriage, another facet of Chilton's instructions – that the prince should arrive in perfect style.

At last, they reached the well-made walls of the city proper, and were met at the shining gate by a phalanx of Eidermark soldiers wearing angel's blood mail, its brilliance tempered by the two-toned red and black tunics draped over, belted at the waist, their chests emblazoned with the royal seal of Eidermark – the same stag that adorned Will's bookmark.

Will's retinue came to a halt. Jack approached a nobleman that stood before the phalanx. He was tall and slender, dressed in green velvet trimmed with gold thread, a silver fox pelt crossing his chest like a sash. It was a blend of cosmopolitan finery with something wild; the fox's paws and the flattened outline of its head still hung from the pelt, should anyone forget it was once an animal. Will liked the juxtaposition. It suggested that no matter how far humanity had removed itself from its primal roots, they were never far away. The nobleman also wore the medal depicting the stag that Will had seen on Dr. Sutcliffe.

Will wondered if he should get out of the carriage, but none of his people moved to open the door. He saw Jack approach with a scroll in his hand.

"Greetings," came the fox-furred nobleman's voice, formal and resonant. "I am Lord Tobias, Earl of Budge, hereby representing our sovereign, His Majesty Hannibal Lecter the 8th of Eidermark and his council. Let me be the first to welcome you to Gammelstrand."

"Well met, my lord," Jack said, his booming alpha voice carrying an authority that, to Will, superseded the patents of nobility that this Lord Tobias possessed, even as Jack bowed and recognized his rank. "I am Sir Jack of Crawford, captain of the Royal Guard of Gaulemagne and sworn protector of Prince William Graham of the House of Beauregard-Devereaux, brother to Crown Prince Matthew Brown."

"Welcome to you all," Tobias said, releasing Jack from his bow. They approached and met between the two parties. Tobias unfurled the scroll. Will couldn't hear what they were saying, trapped as he was within the carriage. Not that he needed to. Those papers were surely the contracts and documents pertaining to the marriage and dowry. The articles of his future — marked and sealed, his own signature unnecessary.

Everything appeared to be in order. The angel's blood gates parted in the center and opened, the contingent of Eidermark guards joining Will's retinue as it passed into the city with Jack and Tobias on horseback in the lead.

The streets were lined with people, and as soon as the carriage rolled past, they lifted their voices in cheer, waving and clapping and whistling, children sitting on their parents' shoulders to catch a glimpse of Will through the windows of the conveyance. Will wanted to

scrunch up in the center of carriage, wishing yet again that Chilton hadn't sent the clothing, but it was his duty to show himself. Besides, he wanted to get a look at the city.

Parts of it were old, he thought, crowded with half-timbered buildings, their peaked roofs topped not with thatch but rich red tiles. Other sections were newer, the wooden buildings likely demolished and rebuilt out of stone to protect against fire. The walled settlement was rudimentary compared to Vercingetorix – Gaulemagne's capital was enormous, stretching up and down the banks of the Clovis, the streets narrow and twisted, its arrondissements ranging from squalor to splendor and everything in between. All the streets here were paved with smooth slabs of stone or tightly masoned brick, and the carriage rolled over them with an ease he hadn't felt since leaving Gaulemagne. Will's retinue passed through markets and merchant districts, guild houses and workshops, the ever-present metalworking forges, and small areas of greenery that seemed to be set aside for growing food within the walls. They were covered with new sprouts of stubborn spring grass and were often full of children playing. Again, he was struck by the health and security the citizens seemed to enjoy. There were a few beggars here and there, which proved in his mind that the streets hadn't been cleansed of the needy before his arrival, but again, it was remarkable how well the common people thrived.

Here was the medical school Dr. Sutcliffe had mentioned. And there were other houses of learning, more per capita than existed in Vercingetorix, small colleges and academies named after noble families, the students gathered on the front steps to wave at their new prince as he passed. One had the Earl of Budge's name and crest on its front arch, and the small courtyard was full of students armed with various instruments or dressed in red robes tied with black sashes. As the carriage went by, they broke into song, filling the air with their rich serenade. Will couldn't make out all the words over the clamoring crowds, the music further muffled by the glass he was trapped behind, but it was a soaring melody, deceptively simple yet somehow layered and thick with harmony.

Welcome, emissary of peace and grace,

Eidermark is home and place

Of he who honors you, his heart

A cup full ere overflowing…

Just when Will allowed himself to be charmed, to uncoil his wariness, to let the words *it's not what I expected* cross his mind, the retinue came to the Engleagig River. There weren't many maps of Eidermark, but Will knew this river connected directly to the bay that stretched between Eidermark's ragged coast and the southernmost edge of the Northern Wastes, the water pinched at Fort Valdemar where the land masses almost touched. On an island in the river stood Castle Lecter, built at the highest point, the rest of the island flaring out from its walls like a woman's gown billowing over the water. The island was edged with docks with boats secured to them and peppered with smaller buildings: stables and forges, icehouses, and

the like. Nearer the castle itself, Will could see the low walls of a garden and its statuary, the beds still barren.

It was beautiful, to be sure, the castle rising tall and formidable from the island, made of red brick and limestone, and roofed with bronze that must have been treated with angel's blood or somehow mixed with it to prevent it from turning green over time. Swans glided along the river in between the mainland and the island, and the bridge, gated on either side, was decorated with remarkable statues of proud stags on one end and ravens on the other, shaped from a shiny black stone that Will had never seen before.

Beautiful. Breathtaking. And brutal.

Tangled in the massive stone antlers of the largest stag statue was a body.

While waiting for the bridge gate to be opened, Will stared at it, unable to tear his eyes away. The corpse had been mounted on the tines of the stag's black stone antlers, which must have been honed to swordlike points. They burst from the body's chest and thighs, the corpse impaled like a shrike's prey, the mottled arms dangling lifelessly. The air around the bridge was thick with crows, ravens, and vultures, the scavengers taking turns alighting on the body, pecking it to pieces and devouring it to the bone. As Will watched, a large raven landed on the lolling head and dug its beak into the corpse's already shredded face, the eyes, nose, and lips eaten up long ago. The half-stripped skull grinned down upon anyone wishing to cross the bridge to Castle Lecter. The flesh of its back had been flayed open, the ribs broken, and the exposed cavity within was now the home of a buzzing horde of insects that swarmed in and out of it like a living shadow.

Beneath the body was a painted board adorned with the Royal Seal of Eidermark. It read:

Baron Petras Kolnas

Usurper – Murderer – Traitor to the Crown

Out of the depths of Will's mind came the pendulum, slithering sidelong like a snake on a sand dune. It straightened with a crack that resounded through Will's consciousness before cutting across his vision as it swung back and forth, filling his senses with its ambient pulse.

I've been saving you for a special occasion. While I savored every day that you rotted in my dungeon, I will savor your execution a thousand times more.

It was no quick death. I skinned you alive, opened you from behind, broke your ribs away from your spine. I watched your breath move your lungs as you screamed.

There will be no honor of burning or burial. In your ambition, you thought to be buried in a marble sepulcher or beneath the floor of a great cathedral. Generations would pass your tomb and read your name and weave your legend into Eidermark's history.

But I have ensured that your name is only a bane, uttered as a curse, and there will be nothing left of you by the time the ravens have finished their feast. They will scatter your bones and dispel your memory.

Dispel you from me. Banish you.

This is my design.

Will opened his eyes when the carriage began to move. He didn't look away as they passed beneath the body. A feeling of satisfaction and peace that was not his own brought a little smile to his face.

Once the corpse was out of sight, however, Will found himself gripping his knees, sweat gathering on his brow beneath the circlet, breathing heavily. Just when he'd thought… His mind went wild, showing him cascading images of the skeletal scarecrows at the Houtland border, the book with its beautiful illustration of an omegan hero, the fleshless face of the traitor, the happy smiles of the peasants. They swirled and undulated together to the rhythm of the song sung for him in welcome, though its melody had shifted to an eerie minor key that echoed through his mind.

The retinue continued up the winding drive toward the castle, coming to a stop near a bubbling fountain depicting an angel with a water vessel in the form of a young girl with a child's rounded face. The front of the palace, flanking the arched door that served as its main entrance, was lined with people – nobles dressed in luxurious but wild finery, an archbishop of the Book from the city's cathedral, and several other clerics dressed in different ways, bearing symbols Will didn't recognize. It also seemed that every member of the staff from kitchen maid to stableboy also waited to welcome him, their uniforms freshly washed and pressed.

In the center of the gathering was, undoubtedly, the King of Eidermark himself, flanked by his counselors. Will only had a quick glimpse before the carriage turned. The door was opening, and Jack's hand extended to help him emerge.

Somehow, the Sovereign of Eidermark, King Hannibal Lecter the 8th, was nothing like Will expected and an exact match to the imago he'd created in his mind.

Will's first thought was an overpowering one: *ALPHA.* A stiff breeze sprang up just as he descended the steps of the carriage, blowing a mingling torrent of scents his way, but the strongest was the most delicious alpha musk he'd ever encountered; its notes, aside from the bodily pheromone, were the smoke of a wood fire on a bitter winter day mingling with a kind of masculine floral and the warmer, mellow notes of amber and spice.

Second, he took in his fiance's face and form. Will's eyes were drawn immediately to the king's striking cheekbones, then his eyes, noting the subtle red ring that surrounded his pupil and marked him as an alpha; the rest of his iris reminded Will of an animal's tawny pelt, warm against the elements, yet feral in the desire to survive above all else. Clean shaven, light complexion, though not as fair as Will's, pale brows–

When Will looked at his mouth, he felt the bottom drop out of the world. Lips markedly darker than the rest of his face, the way the upper spread in the center instead of gathering like Will's did. It was lushly august, and the pendulum in his mind crossed his vision in a single golden glide, showing him how those lips might be cruel or saturnine, affectionate, or contented, regal or wild, all expressed with the tiniest shifts of their posture.

He was striking. And Will felt stricken, as if the old legends of Neithaal, the spear-wielding god of love were true, and his heart had been bisected by his magical lance. Working in tandem, perhaps, with the Old God of time, Maradrut, who took the form of an ox yoked to the Wheel of the Year, pulling it endlessly across the field of the universe. In Will's perception, his plodding came to a halt as Jack escorted him across the smooth flagstone courtyard.

The closer they came, the more details were evident, and Will's eyes gobbled them up. The sovereign's ash-maple hair was combed carefully back, his head and proudly postured neck bearing a seven-pointed crown. It was crafted from a black metal that Will had never seen before, threaded through with angel's blood designs that resembled tangles of antlers, and inlaid with deep red rubies. The king's figure was evident due to his large-shouldered, snugly fitting waistcoat, the same ruby red as the stones in his crown, stitched with intricate silver and gold patterns. It had a tidy row of cloth-covered buttons and gathered at his waist with a thick belt crafted to look like a pair of raven's wings. What struck Will immediately was the stark difference between the ostentatious way the Earl of Chilton dressed (which affected, of course, what the rest of the court of Gaulemagne wore) and the stately, regal silhouette of the King of Eidermark, whose body was a canvas upon which the symbolic identity of his parentage and homeland were so clearly illustrated. He embodied elegance intertwined with undeniable strength.

Another sweep of the breeze brought the king's scent to him again. Will felt a gentle seeping between his legs. Slick. To Will's dismay, his body knew exactly what it wanted, and his cock gave a tiny, hopeful twitch.

Behind them, back down the bridge, Will heard the harsh caw of a crow, which was then taken up by several others. Crows. Ravens. Carrion birds gathered here. That was part of the *design*, that they should be fed the delicacy of a traitor's flesh in full view of the entire city of Gammelstrand.

Closer.

The birds quieted just long enough for Will to hear the rustle of papers in Jack's other hand. The contract between the Earl of Chilton and the king who stood before him now, a legal binding upon which Will's signature and consent were in no way required or even considered.

Jack stopped a good ten feet from where the King of Eidermark stood. A young man who had been standing close at the king's side came forward to accept the contracts with a graceful bow before returning to his sovereign and opening them to ensure their validity. He murmured something in the king's ear. The king didn't even glance his way. His eyes were fixed on Will with a glinting possessiveness. Yet his voice was resonant and courtly. "Welcome to Eidermark."

"May I present Prince William Graham of the House of Beauregard-Devereaux, brother of Matthew Brown of the House of Beauregard-Devereaux, crown prince of Gaulemagne, son of King Agustin and Queen Charlotte, rightful sovereigns of the kingdom and all its territories and protectorates as ordained by God." Jack's voice boomed across the courtyard, bouncing off the stone castle walls, heard easily over the bubbling of the fountain.

Will felt Jack's hand squeeze his, the sudden constriction knocking him back to reality with the mental force of a slap in the face. Jack was already bending his body to show his deference. Will bowed as well, lower than usual, and used the moment of broken eye contact to reorient himself. Eyes were distracting. *He* was distracting. But it didn't change what this was – an exchange of goods. "Your Majesty," he greeted stiffly as he straightened his spine and let go of Jack's hand.

"Your Highness." The King of Eidermark inclined his head a few degrees. "Welcome to my home. I trust you had a pleasant journey."

"I did." Will set his mouth into a firm, bitter line, even as a beat of uncomfortable silence passed. Decorum would suggest he ought to describe the beauty of the landscape or compliment the sovereign on the bounty of his holdings. But Will refused it, leveling the king with his gaze, fury lighting along his nerves and replacing the instinctive desire.

The king elegantly brushed the silence aside. "The day is fine. Let me show you the gardens and grounds. Perhaps help your dogs settle in."

Jack smiled, showing teeth, beaming over at Will as if to say, *there now, doesn't that sound nice?*

It did sound nice. But Will wasn't about to give him an inch. "My people have traveled far and are hungry and tired," he said, keeping his voice neutral.

"Of course. May I show you to your chambers, then?"

Will nodded coolly, and the palace staff sprang into action, welcoming Will's guards and attendants, seeing to the luggage and the dowry, directing the wagons full of wine casks to the storehouses.

Jack escorted him to the king and passed his hand into the sovereign's. Will's face felt hot, but if he blushed, it was out of indignation, surely.

The nobility and advisers lined themselves up and down the long hall in the front of the castle that separated the wings, and Will was forced to walk past all of them, hear their names and accept their greetings. The king, however, kept things moving, trying, it seemed, to honor Will's request of respite.

At last, they passed through an arch and climbed a staircase, leaving everyone behind but the young man bearing the contracts; he trailed a few steps back, speaking to Georgia with quiet intensity regarding the household arrangements. Will kept his eyes straight ahead. He'd never been fond of eye contact, but often forced himself to endure it. Omegas were expected to keep their eyes averted to show deference — well, Will wasn't having any of that. Still, it was a struggle against either his nature or natural disdain for social connection to look people in the eye.

As much as Will wanted this king to understand that he wasn't going to play along with his enslavement, he didn't dare look at him now for fear of losing the grip on his antipathy. Why did King Hannibal have to be so damn…? Will didn't even let himself think the word. He

stared straight ahead, his chin up, head held high, shoulders squared, jaw set. The silence between them was a knife balanced on its point.

He could tell the king was looking at him, could feel his gaze like a ray of sunlight on the side of his face. Will didn't dare yank his hand away, but he made a subtle move to ease his fingers from the king's courtly grip of escort. They met resistance, gentle but unyielding. His hand was large and warm, the fingers deft and strong, and Will had to stop himself from breathing the alpha's scent in as deeply as he could when they reached the top of the stairs and turned down another passage with dark green walls, Lecter family ancestors staring down at them from heavy gilt-framed paintings. In each one was, somewhere, the shape of a stag, its antlers, or a raven. A gentle draft between the corner of the stairwell and this hall blew another lungful of the king's scent right into Will's face.

"Not fond of eye contact, are you?" the king inquired, lightly enough for it to be taken as gentle teasing, though Will heard its curl of curiosity.

"Eyes are distracting," Will said stiffly, still not looking at him. "You see too much, or you don't see enough."

"What do you think of Eidermark's countryside? Perhaps you noticed the streams and rivers. Full of fish."

Will started, almost fell for it, a fish himself tempted by bait on a hook. He didn't answer.

"You're at home in the natural world," the King said in his soft, musical Eidermark accent that caressed Will's ear. "That carriage must have suffocated you. No wonder you wanted to ride in the open. I imagine Vercingetorix was similarly stifling."

How did he…?

The king's observations felt like an analytical ambush. Will went on the defensive, trying again, more firmly this time, to remove his hand from Hannibal's grip. "I felt it was my place, riding with the herd of cattle. You bought me the same as you bought them, so, ah… seemed *appropriate* I should… march along with the other *livestock*."

Will did allow himself to turn now and glance at the king to see how his insolence landed. The king kept his gaze stubbornly straight ahead now, but Will could see the tiny curve of his mouth. A mild, maddening smile touched those princely lips that filled Will with reckless fury, enough to drown the observance of the king's striking features, to erode the aesthetics.

At the end of the corridor was a series of apartments that branched out from one another. The first was a cozy receiving room with one large arched window that looked out over the garden. Built in beneath the window was a curved seat covered with thick, inviting cushions of creamy velvet, with a small shelf lined with books built into the wall behind, an easy reach for one sitting upon it. The room was painted a soothing combination of lavender and white, accented with gold, and containing a hearth and a table and chairs as well.

Through the next door was the bedchamber itself. Will expected something overly adorned or vulgarly opulent, but the large room, lit by a sizable bank of arched latticed windows, was

stately and graceful, and comfortingly functional. While still being large and high-ceilinged, it exuded again a kind of coziness. The walls were painted to look like a lush forest filled with animals and creatures described in the oldest stories of the Old Religion – sylphs and undines, dyads, and wyverns. In each panel, Will found a stag or a raven somewhere in the landscape. The large bed hung with green and gold velvet curtains, and while the dark wood of the furniture was elaborately carved in places, clean lines prevailed. Near the window was a large writing desk with a comfortable chair and several nearby oil lamps. The workspace was already set with paper, pens, ink, and a blotter. And near the grand fireplace were, again, several cushions resting on a small but thick rug, something that could be easily shaken out and cleaned. Dog beds.

It had to be the best chamber in the entire castle, with a view of the gardens and the river beyond, the city stretching behind, catching the northwestern light for an optimal illumination and warmth. A cross breeze could likely be created by opening this window and the one in the receiving room, increasing ventilation. Will noted the rich gemstone colors of the murals and could smell the fresh paint.

The king led him to another door in the bedchamber and opened it, showing a small, discreet room. The windows were up high enough that they had to be opened with a pole, but the room was again able to be well ventilated. The floor was heaped with pillows and soft blankets. The only furniture was a large brass tub that could be filled with water and then drained out through a pipe in the floor.

It was a heat room. Will had had one back in Vercingetorix, though it wasn't half as comfortable, its existence hidden behind a panel in his bedchamber wall as if it was a shameful secret. This offered privacy without denying Will's fertility cycle's existence.

"Your thoughts?" the king asked patiently as Will glanced around the room, trying not to overtly marvel at the details.

"It's, ah…" Will felt a trickle of sweat at the back of his neck. Just thinking about his heat, standing next to his alpha—

THIS alpha.

The alpha, an alpha, not—!

Will was saved by the door to the bedchamber opening wide, attendants bringing in his traveling trunks, Georgia directing them to various armoires and chests of drawers with deft politeness. Will broke away from the king and hurried through a door inlaid with colored circles of glass and found himself on a stone balcony overlooking the gardens below. He rested his hands on the cold railing as a chilly wind whipped his clothing against him. Will shivered, again cursing the Earl of Chilton's insistence that he wear this ridiculous ensemble. The breeze cut right through it, and his feet were frozen in seconds.

To one side of the garden, he saw the wagons from his retinue roll down a lane, empty now. Goods delivered. Contract fulfilled.

Will started as the warm weight of a blanket eased down over his shoulders. He turned and was assaulted with the sight and scent of the king once more. His intended had slipped a quilt around him from behind, and Will reached up to grab the edges and hold it against himself. In doing so, his hand closed over the king's as the sovereign of Eidermark's fingertips grazed Will's exposed throat, lingering just a moment too long for it to be unintentional.

Will turned, drawing the blanket tightly around himself. He tried to back away, but the balcony railing prevented him.

"I trust you've found your accommodations satisfactory," the king said. His tone was evenly courteous, but Will could sense a stalking tension in him, like a panther hiding in the undergrowth until just the right moment, a shadow of teeth and claws and infinite patience.

And something soft, hidden at his core, a little bird of hope. Wounded, hopping about with a broken wing.

Will knew he had a choice. He *could* help it.

Instead, he crushed it.

"Are you… going to *force yourself* on me now, or, ah… wait until I've had a chance to unpack?" he asked, poison trickling through each syllable.

"I thought dinner, perhaps," was the mild reply.

Will scoffed. "Dinner."

"Yes."

Will pulled the blanket even tighter around himself. It didn't help his feet, however. "Let me guess. Some, ah… feast, so everyone can get a look at-at me – decide if I was worth the *price*?"

"Just the two of us," the king clarified. "I have a private kitchen room. Much more intimate."

"Being bought and sold really ruins the appetite." Will raised his chin and forced himself to stare directly into the alpha's eyes. The expansion of the red ring was subtle but telling. Will was getting to him. It would probably spell disaster, make everything worse – the king was well within his legal rights to rape or beat his omega, if he didn't leave visible marks. And this vicious man, who displayed the corpses of his enemies so proudly, likely had methods of torture that were far worse than a beating.

So be it. Will refused to be complicit in his own slavery.

"Another time, then."

Will blinked. Blinked again.

The king only smiled and bowed to him, despite the difference in their ranks. He did, however, extend a hand. Will gathered the blanket on both sides and freed up his own,

conceding this one gesture. The king curled his hand beneath Will's and raised it to his lips, pressing a kiss against it that dared to linger. A counter move, perhaps, in a game Will had thought he'd understood.

"The portraits your cousin sent pale in comparison. Your artists in Gaulemagne are famed throughout the continent, but they failed to capture your beauty nor do it any justice."

Will slaughtered the instinctive pleasure of the compliment the moment it arose in his mind, burying a knife in its unsuspecting back. His next victim was the delight he felt, having his hand cradled and worshiped, the promise of what the alpha might do to the rest of his body based on how he treated this one appendage.

Will pulled his hand away, and the king released it, but only after a moment of holding it too tightly for escape. A fraction of a second. A reminder.

"Goodnight, then." The king turned and disappeared through the balcony door.

Will slid down onto the cold stone, leaning his back against the railing, and wrapped the blanket around his feet as well, knees drawn up to his chest. He waited there until Georgia came out for him. "You'll catch your death out here!" she scolded.

"Oh, that'd inconvenience him," Will said, teeth chattering as Georgia pulled him back inside. The chambers were arranged, his things put away. Georgia had warmer clothes already pulled out and waiting. "Like if half the herd of cattle we'd brought died upon arrival. A lot of wasted *meat*."

"Depends on how they died. If the meat's still good, we could have a feast," Georgia teased him, taking the blanket, and folding it up, setting it on one of the cozy armchairs next to the roaring fire before returning to unlace Will. Together, they hurried him out of the gossamer aquamarine and gold garment and sandals, and wrapped him securely in woolen stockings, breeches, and a tunic, a fur mantle around his shoulders.

"You should go find something to eat," Will suggested. "I'm sure the king's told the kitchen that if I refuse to eat with him, I'm not to eat at all, but–"

Just then, there was a knock at the chamber door. Georgia went to answer it and spoke briefly to a maid. She turned back to Will. "Your dinner's here."

In the receiving room was a generous spread. Will's stomach growled urgently at the sight of all the dishes. Fish cooked in white wine with herbs, steamed mussels and garlic, fried slices of potato, and a massive tureen of soup. It looked and smelled like bolhabaissa, the seafood stew from the southern regions of Gaulemagne. His favorite. Surely it couldn't have all the ingredients, with the difference in climate, but it was certainly a clever copy.

And there was rhubarb cake, just like the one Will had missed out on earlier.

"Let's eat," Georgia said with a smile. "And then we'll have them send up the dogs."

Trust Dies But Mistrust Blossoms

Chapter Summary

> Will settles into life at the castle, refusing every invitation made by King Hannibal. And yet, he is not punished for this insolence. After weeks of living under the same roof but only speaking through messengers, the alpha king at last uses his royal position to order Will to have breakfast with him.

The knock at the door came at the same time every day – just as Will had finished his tea and gotten dressed, ready to begin what threatened to become his routine: spending his days on the castle's island grounds with his dogs and Georgia, sneaking off to a grain shed to train and practice throwing knives and swinging a sword, and passing the evenings writing letters and working on his next pamphlet. Georgia went out for stretches of time to socialize with the servants and guards, trying to recreate the contacts they'd had back in Gaulemagne. She was his link to the outside world and focused herself on collecting the names of omegan sympathizers and clandestine publishers.

But all of this had to begin, it seemed, with a daily visit from the king's personal secretary.

Will had just slipped a dark gray vest over his head and let Georgia adjust the collar of the white shirt he wore beneath when the knock came. "Come in," Will called, sitting to pull on his boots.

Randall opened the door, bearing his daily message. "Good morning, Your Highness," he said, voice stiff with judgment. Their interactions had grown increasingly cold as time went on. "I have a message from the king."

"On the table," Will said, not bothering to look up as he adjusted his footwear.

Randall added the missive in his hands to the pile on a side table – all unopened. But then, he picked it back up again, clearing his throat. "Your Highness – if I may, I am privy to the contents, and you will *want* to read this particular message."

"Don't tell me what I want or don't want," Will snapped, getting to his feet. Churlish, to be sure, but he'd vowed to stand his ground. He might be a prisoner and a slave, a piece of property, but he didn't have to make it easy. Didn't have to be complicit.

"Will," Georgia said under her breath, a warning. Almost two weeks had passed, and not once had the king returned uninvited. Will caught sight of him in windows, gazing down at the castle grounds from his chambers or those reserved for the duties of state. They'd locked eyes one afternoon when the king had left with his retinue to attend a meeting of religious leaders and delegates from various corners of Eidermark. But he never ordered Will into his

presence, never showed up at Will's door. There were no threats. No coercion either, though everything was arranged for Will's ultimate comfort. He had to admit that the dogs' kennels were finely made and much appreciated, as was the fact that all seven could sleep in Will's chambers if he wanted them to. There had been no beatings or tortures or even the whisper of a threat. For a sovereign with such a formidable and vicious reputation, it was more than surprising. Still, Will resisted, remaining loyal to his stalwart ideals. He shouldn't be here in the first place, and a gilded cage was still a prison.

Clearly, however, Georgia thought he was pushing his luck. But Will felt Randall's disdain wash over him, fed by the strange golden pendulum in his mind that moved over the secretary's face like a ray of unnatural sunshine, reading his anger and disgust like a topographical map though his features remained neutral.

"Put it with the others," Will insisted.

"His Majesty King Hannibal has been more than patient," Randall snapped, reaching, at last, his breaking point. "His requests polite and his gifts generous!"

"And you ah – you take it *personally*, Mr. Tier."

"Will!" Georgia hissed his name again, and Will caught himself before he said his next thought aloud. *You wish he'd pay you this kind of attention.*

"He is the Sovereign of Eidermark. My king. And yours. *Your Highness*," he added after a disdainful pause. "Insults aimed at him are aimed at every loyal subject in the kingdom."

"Thank you, Mr. Tier, that will be all." Jack had appeared in the doorway behind Randall. The secretary shot Will one more icy glance and left, the door giving an indignant little slam behind him.

Jack hurried on his mask, filling the air with the scent of cloves. "Will. Read the letter and see the king," he growled. Winston had always liked Jack, but now he raised his head from his paws where he lounged on a rug near the hearth and folded his ears down with a soft rumble of warning. "Your objections have been officially noted. It's time to face this. I've been with the king daily. He's a wise ruler, fair and courteous. If you'd just put in the tiniest bit of effort–"

"This isn't… brattiness o-or sulking, Jack, this is *civil disobedience*!" Will insisted. "I thought you respected me. Or are you just like every other alpha?"

Jack's eyes flashed crimson. "God forbid I want you to be happy, Will. Your parents might be gone, but they were good to me, to Gaulemagne. I want to do right by them!" It was his turn to storm out.

Georgia picked up the folded parchment and stretched it out to him, her mouth a pale line.

"Not you, too."

"Read it, at least."

Of course, Will couldn't reveal the deepest reason he didn't want to see the king. There was the little problem of the sovereign's distracting attractiveness — his dark hooded eyes, the blush of his kingly lips, and the striking silhouette of his cheekbones that rose up against his face. All that, and his scent, which Will hadn't smelled since their first meeting but remembered all too well.

He pressed his lips together, reached out, and took the parchment from Georgia's outstretched hand.

To His Highness Prince William James Graham of the house of Beauregard-Devereaux:

It is my hope that you have found your accommodations and your time in my home comfortable. I write again to request your presence for a private meal.

I am compelled to inform you that my next missive will be a legally binding Royal Order. I humbly request to share one meal with you a day of your choosing.

If I may, I have suggestions for Miss Madchen as to where she might find what she's looking for. I hope to see you soon so that we may discuss them.

With hope,

King Hannibal Lecter the 8th, Sovereign of Eidermark

Will made a low sound in his throat and passed the letter back to Georgia. She took it and held it tilted toward the fading sunlight that still eked through the windows. "He knows," she said in a grim half-whisper.

"He suspects," Will corrected her. "This is his way of rattling us. And to get me to accept his invitation."

"Next one's a legally binding order," Georgia said, adding the letter to the pile of unopened missives on the table. "Do you think he'll really do it? He hasn't threatened you yet."

Will heard the cries of ravens in the distance. Whenever they were on the palace grounds, Will always kept the castle itself between him and the bridge leading to the mainland, where the carrion birds feasted, consuming more and more of the impaled corpse each day.

"If he says he'll do it, he'll do it. Man of his word," Will murmured, kneeling down to pet Winston with a pensive hand.

"What do you think he'd do if he knew you wrote those…" Georgia dropped her voice entirely and mouthed *pamphlets.*

"I don't know," Will admitted. "He, ah… he may think I'm threatening the succession laws here or trying to stir up trouble. Probably wants me to keep my mouth shut and my pen dry

before I ruin Eidermark's reputation."

"Or," Georgia suggested, "maybe he does have some ideas for how to get your writing distributed discreetly."

Will shot her an incredulous look as he poured himself a glass of cold fermented cider, which was his new favorite beverage if he was being honest, as betraying as it was to Gaulemagne's famous wine.

"You haven't been off this island since you came. I have. Out in the city. The omegas here – it's not like back home. I saw a man in the stocks for rape, and omegas were there with a crowd throwing rotten vegetables at him. Safe to say I haven't gone into the less reputable sections of town, but I haven't seen what I used to see down the alleys in Vercingetorix."

Will sighed, shaking his head. "There's only one way to find out… what *His Majesty* knows or thinks he knows." Will sat down at the elaborate writing desk and dashed off a note.

Breakfast tomorrow.

-WJG

Georgia scoffed when she saw it but folded it up dutifully and applied Will's seal. "Why breakfast?"

"Busy man, the king. Doesn't have all day to bother with me, I'm sure." A dinner could go on for hours, and a midday meal could devolve into a dinner; breakfast was a safer bet.

Will slept little that night, and when he did, he dreamed with such force he woke himself up – twisted shapes made of fleshy dream-stuff, splattered in blood, a feast for the crows. Antlers impaling a war-torn sky, the screams of his sister, and the eyes of the sovereign of Eidermark burning through the darkness, glowing a passionate alpha red.

Georgia knew better than to question his choice of clothing the next morning. She certainly didn't expect him to dress to impress, and silently helped him into his shirt and vest, tying a length of demure brown silk around his neck that kept the shirt collar pressed tightly against his throat, hiding his mating gland lest the king get any ideas. The morning was chilly, though, and he relented and let her drape a waist-length dark blue cape over his shoulders, clasped together by a gold chain.

When Randall saw him, however, he apparently was unable to contain the miffed little sniff he made in response to Will's casual appearance.

The secretary led Will through the castle, everyone they encountered drawing to the side to perform the requisite bows. At last, they came to the grand dining room, where state dinners were likely held. Will was surprised to see that the table wasn't set, gleaming dark and bare in

the subtle light of the latticed windows that ran along one side of the space. Randall walked him through and to a small door at the corner that Will assumed led to a butler's pantry.

It opened on a little kitchen, lit by a merry little hearth and an arched window with frosted glass. Here, a small table was set for two. Someone was tending to a metal pan of sizzling food that was held over the fire by three carved stones. Will could smell eggs and meat and spices, and his stomach growled audibly.

The cook was King Hannibal Lecter the 8th, Sovereign of Eidermark. He turned, a plate full of some kind of breakfast in one hand and a wooden spatula in the other. "Your Highness," he greeted, voice softly resonant, pausing only for a moment to set down the dish on the table before loading up another plate, his hair brushing over his temple. "Good morning."

"Is there anything else I can do for you, Your Majesty?" Randall asked before Will could formulate any sort of response. Shocked into silence, he found himself scowling at the king, who was dressed in simple elegance in a quilted gray doublet with dark brown breeches and boots, his waist circled by a matching chestnut leather cummerbund. His only adornment was a silver chain that hung halfway down his chest, glimmering here and there with the subtlest of garnets. His head was uncrowned, and his face was mild and welcoming.

"No, Randall, thank you – that will be all."

Randall bowed and left, catching Will's eye as he turned, blue to blue, the secretary's glacial-cold.

"How do you take your tea?" The king lifted a glazed earthenware teapot, white with dark red designs painted on the sides in the Yamatoan style depicting bent-necked cranes and budding cherry trees.

The benign question flooded Will with a mosaic of sensations ranging from sharp anger to sweetly wistful domesticity. He bit the inside of his lip, hoping the pain would refocus him. "Uhm, sugar." He crossed his arms and felt himself recede under the cape, wishing it could engulf him entirely.

The king lifted the delicate lid of a sugar dish, which matched the teacups and the teapot, and spooned some precious white granules into Will's cup. "Like this?"

"Ah, another." Will cleared his throat, trying not to home in on those hands, strong and defined while still being clean and soft at the edges, the nails trimmed short and meticulously buffed.

The king complied, then poured his own cup. He set down the teapot and approached. "May I?"

Will didn't understand what he was giving permission for, but the nearness of the alpha overwhelmed his carefully guarded senses, ones he had spent years training, and he nodded in assent, a reflex. The king gently guided his shoulders, turning Will as he stepped behind him, and unclasped his cape, hanging it on a hook near the door. Will's heart stumbled, but having his back to the king, out of his gaze, woke him to himself. When he looked at the

sovereign again, he made sure to emote his displeasure, lifting his chin and setting his mouth in a line.

“Please.” The king motioned to the table, then pulled out Will’s chair for him.

Will glared at him until he stepped back to his side of the table and lowered himself into his chair. Only then did Will sit opposite, a complete breach of decorum.

The food, however, smelled wonderful. “You made this?” Will asked, picking up his fork after slipping his napkin into his lap.

“I’m very careful about what I put into my body. Which means I end up preparing most meals myself.”

“Are your countrymen so eager to poison you?” Will asked with a little sneer as he lifted his teacup to his lips. Mmm. Good. And he’d gotten the sugar right.

“No more or less eager than they are to poison you,” the king replied smoothly, sipping from his own cup. Will thought of the rhubarb cake Jack hadn’t let him eat. “Though from what I understand, your cousin, the Earl of Chilton, has more reason to fear than we.”

Will felt a half-smile catch the corner of his lip on a fishhook. “That’s why he needs Eidermark weapons,” he said, picking up his fork and motioning to the food on his plate. “What is this?”

“A little protein scramble to start the day. Some eggs. Some sausage.”

“Never heard of a king who cooks his own meals.”

“A necessity that has become a passion.”

Will’s stomach demanded to be sated, and he gave in, spearing some sausage and egg on his fork and taking a bite. Only then did the king eat, a satisfied expression climbing over his features, more obvious with each time Will’s jaw moved to chew. “It’s delicious,” Will said, the compliment begrudging but unable to remain unexpressed. Then, “Thank you.”

“My pleasure.”

Those two words sent a tremble racing along Will’s nerves. He calmed it with another sip of tea.

“I would apologize for signing my name to a contract that decided your future without your consent, but I know I will soon be apologizing again, and you’ll tire of that eventually, so I have to use apologies sparingly.”

Will swallowed the juicy piece of meat and chased it with a sip of tea, sweet where his voice was bitter. “Nice of you to, ah, acknowledge that this is an arrangement. A business deal. Just keep it *professional*.”

“Or we could socialize like adults. God forbid we become friendly.” Will could have sworn he saw the king’s irises flood with alpha red, just for a moment. Or was it a trick of the growing light as the sun rose in the sky outside?

Will scoffed, slouching back in his chair, his posture diffident. “I don’t find you that interesting,” he stated, raising his chin again in leveled defiance.

But the king didn’t take the bait. Again, the maddening smile, so benign. “You will,” he said.

Will stared him down, but the look of mild amusement never left the sovereign’s fine features. He did, however, change the subject. Will took the opportunity to break eye contact for a brief respite. “The captain of your guard – Sir Jack of Crawford – he tells me you rode most of the way here disguised as a guard. I’m interested to know how you passed for one.”

“I can ride a horse and swing a sword the same as any,” Will countered indignantly, though he did continue to eat. So good. The rumors about Eidermark food were completely false. Although, he hadn’t spent a winter here yet, so he didn’t know about the salted fish.

“I’ve spoken to your good friend Georgia about you.” The king rose to pour more tea into Will’s cup. It was unnerving, the sovereign of an entire nation serving him that way. Destabilizing. Will tried to keep his face blank and masklike. “She wouldn’t gossip. Not a word. She’s very protective of you. Smitten, I would say. She asked me to be *gentle* with you.”

Will felt crimson flooding his cheeks. He set his fork down with a clatter and folded his arms over his chest again. Several responses looped through his head, but he had the wherewithal to wait until he could speak without a hint of fury. “You have a reputation in Gaulemagne,” he said. “They call you King Hannibal the Vicious. I don’t usually, ah, give much stock to things heard at court, but I saw those… *scarecrows* at the border. And the man you impaled over your bridge.”

“You speak as if I did these things myself.”

“You gave very specific orders,” Will insisted, leaning his elbow on the table and bending forward with an impudent glare. “It was your vision. What you wanted.”

“The Devil is in the details.” If King Hannibal was ruffled, he revealed nothing, but leaned forward as well, eyes glimmering with amusement. “How did you know I gave the order? What gave me away?”

Will’s lower lip quivered. “Everything,” he hissed. “It’s like you had to show me the negative so I could see the positive. Y-you pass them off as warnings, but… they’re not warnings so much a-as offerings. You want people to see the contrast. Something so *savage* protecting the borders of a-a land of plenty, where you train doctors, and the children are well-fed and your treasury’s full. Eidermark is a gift wrapped in violence.”

The king’s face was stricken, just for a moment, a flicker of deep vulnerability that was followed by a smile so adoring it brought another blush to Will’s face. A wave of alpha

pheromone crashed over him and he forced himself to drink more tea before it had cooled, purposely burning his tongue.

“The mathematics of human behavior. All those ugly variables. And yet you seem to have no problem with the calculations.” Will felt just as scrutinized in return, as if the king’s gaze was a touch, feeling his face for the truth like a blind man searching for an expression. “Do you ever have any problems?”

Will gestured to his own chest with a snarky little smirk. “Me? *No*.” *What problems could an omega possibly have?* he thought darkly.

“Of course not. You and I are just alike. Problem free. Nothing about us to feel horrible about.” The words were laden with a meaning Will didn’t understand, and it made him prickly. “Even your friends, Georgia and Jack, see you as a fragile little tea-cup, the finest china used only for special guests.”

“Like this?” Will motioned with the cup in his hand.

“This set was a gift from my Aunt Murasaki. Came all the way from Yamato without a single chip or the tiniest fracture. Stronger than it looks.”

Will tilted his head, a curl falling over his temple. “How do you see me?” he wondered.

“The mongoose I want under the house when the snakes slither by,” the king said with another of those maddening smiles. “As much as it irks you to bear the assumed weaknesses of an omega, it also works to your advantage, should your opponents be unaware of what you’re capable of.”

“What am I capable of?”

“Revolution,” the king replied easily. “Sedition. Uniting those sympathetic to your cause through your written words alone.”

Will’s breath threatened to pinch off in his throat. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Your friend Miss Madchen has been inquiring about printing presses and those sympathetic to omegan rights. I assume she’s rebuilding the necessary contacts to publish your pamphlets. Will you change anything about your writing style or arguments now that you have a new audience in Eidermark?”

Will just narrowed his eyes again, sitting back against the chair’s slats.

“Once I regained control of Eidermark from the Triumvirate, I initiated several reforms. One of which was a set of laws offering omegas more freedoms than neighboring countries. Were you aware?”

Will shook his head, a tight little motion.

“It isn’t something I wish to reveal to the rest of the continent, lest they mistake my sense of justice for weakness,” King Hannibal said, finishing his food in between speaking. “While I

cannot offer omegas anything further through official means, I am happy to support the expansion of their citizenship in other ways. Pressure on our representatives might encourage them to, in turn, put pressure on the crown."

Will was too stunned to speak.

"I'd like to see your latest work if you'd let me. Perhaps we could collaborate." He paused, looking at Will's plate. Then, "Finish your breakfast."

Will obeyed.

A Function of Power and Not Truth

Chapter Summary

> Will tells the king what happened to his parents, and what he had to do to save Alana -- the most un-omegan act in the world.

The morning was chilly, the air damp with rain and the scent of wet stone. And wet dog. Will groaned as Ellie jumped up on his bed to greet him, licking his face and burrowing her rain-damp body into the blanket, her tail wagging so hard it shook the rest of her. He petted her, eyes still closed, shielding his face with his other hand.

“Georgia?”

Her response was a mischievous laugh. “That’ll teach you to sleep in.”

Will sat up, still petting the dog. It was after sunrise, although the overcast weather made it difficult to tell.

Georgia poured warm soapy water into his washbasin. He dutifully got out of bed to use it, dragging the soft cloth over his body while she laid out his clothes. “You’re bright-eyed, considering how late you came back last night,” he said, noting how she hummed and made the bed after chasing Ellie out of it, then briskly brushed his azure tunic before bringing it to him. This garment was a step more elegant than what he’d been wearing to breakfast over the last week or so, stitched with gold designs, the deep-cut neckline adorned most heavily and patterned with diamond-shaped scarlet embroidery. Will eyed it, pulling on his undershirt.

“I had a meeting with Edvin,” she said mysteriously through a smile she seemed unable to control.

“Edvin, as in, Baron Komeda’s favored valet?”

“Edvin as in Baron Komeda’s favored valet,” she confirmed, helping him slide the tunic over his head, reaching around him to gather it with a pale leather belt.

“And?”

“Well, I got him a little drunk on Gaulemagne’s finest white wine, and asked a few questions, probed here and there…”

He grabbed his breeches from the rack and pulled them on impatiently. “All right, you, ah… plied your charms. And…?”

“He’s a sympathizer. His sister was an omega raped and impregnated and forced to marry the attacker. Though he says she ‘grew fond of him in later years’.”

Will scoffed. “Just means she thought about killing him less often.”

“Either way, he thinks he can get a pamphlet in front of the Baron before he leaves for the seaside to spend time with extended family.”

“Which would include his sister.” Lady Anita was an elected representative for a locality on the far western coast of Eidermark, one of twelve who came to the capitol to advocate for their part of the country to the Noble Circle, appointed advisers to the king. Will and Georgia planned to trickle their ideology closer and closer to that circle. That way, when the issue came up it would seem organic, stemming from the will of the people, not whispered into the king’s ear by his foreign bridegroom.

“Exactly,” Georgia said, anointing her hands with a drop of sweet-smelling golden oil and brushing them through his curls, rubbing the excess on his neck.

“Why’d you pick this?” he asked, smoothing the blue tunic against his chest.

“It’s a dreary day. Wear something bright.”

He gave her a baleful stare. “For me, or for *him*?”

“Will,” she said, patting his cheek, “you have to admit, the suggestions he gave for the next pamphlet were spot-on.”

Will rolled his eyes. She was right, but… “I… appreciate what he did for us. What he’s… doing for us. But it doesn’t absolve him f-from trading me like a *cow* o-or a set of armor.”

“I know, Will. And I think he knows that, too. Just…”

“What, play along? Count my blessings, that I wasn’t sold to someone worse?”

“Yes,” she said, flapping her hands against her dress. “Will, we can’t change everything overnight! But think about it – you gained something from the trade as well. An ally. With power. Do you think I wanted to spend half the night drinking wine with Edvin, a married man with a wife and six little ankle-biters that he spoke of fondly while flirting with *me*?”

“That’s not the same.” A hot flush rose to his cheeks. He bit back the words he wanted to say. *Don’t compare us. You suffered a few hours of flirting. Did you open your legs for him? Are you expected to bear him more children?*

“I’m sorry,” she said after a few moments, kneeling to pet Ellie, whose head had popped up from its resting place on her paws at the sound of distressed voices. Will wasn’t entirely sure she was apologizing to him and not the dog, but he accepted it and went to breakfast.

He opened the door to the little kitchen just as the sky opened, thrumming sheets and sheets of rain against the little window. The table was set, a candelabra in the center shaped like a

stag's head, with a small candle on each tine of the antlers, the storm outside making it dark enough to need artificial light.

The king straightened, pulling a circular pan out of the bread oven, his hands protected by a thick cloth. "There you are. This was in danger of overcooking."

"Didn't have the sun to wake me." Will paused by his chair, waiting. Every day, the king pulled out his chair for him and insisted on positioning it close to the table, as if Will couldn't do it himself. And again, he came to do so, but only after a long moment where he busied himself spooning berries into small dishes. The pleased smile on his face made Will's mouth scowl down at the corners. He'd been *trained* to receive the unwanted chivalry. Damn him.

On Will's plate was a sheaf of rolled parchment tied with a black ribbon. Will untied the bow and unfurled it, leaving his plate clear. Hannibal filled it with a slice of savory pie with eggs, sausage, early greens, and mushrooms.

"What's this?" Will turned the paper toward the light. It was a simple document but signed and marked with the king's seal in blood-red wax, depicting the stag's head with the raven and heart.

"It's the deed to an estate in the southern hills." The king fixed Will's tea to his exact specifications, as he did each morning, and served it to him. "Small. Politically unimportant. But there is a house, surrounded by fertile lands. My grandmother grew up there, the daughter of a minor count. Humble beginnings for a future queen."

Will read through the document quickly, finding it to be just as the king said. A section at the end detailed a transfer of ownership – the crown gifting the estate to Prince William Graham of the House of Beauregard-Devereaux of Gaulemagne. It was already signed and sealed, provided Will signed as well. "The lands bring a small income, enough to sustain a life there if managed well. You'll see there's also an allowance attached."

"I… don't understand," Will admitted, watching the king lift his china cup to his smiling lips.

"While I can't offer you a cancellation of the agreement I made with your cousin the Earl of Chilton, I can give you this. It's a measure of independence. Should you find life here so distasteful, you have a home of your own. Gates and doors you may close between us, should you feel the need."

Will's heart oscillated between gratitude and anger and affection and distrust. If the contract was valid, he would still be forced to marry King Hannibal the Vicious and bear him at least one alpha child. But Hannibal was offering him a separate life away from court, where once the heir was secured, Will could live out his days without having to see the capitol again.

But if Will was going to write his pamphlets and advocate for omegan rights, he needed to be close to the seats of power.

Was it a choice that was no choice at all?

But the king didn't have to do this. He could chain Will to a bed if he chose, breed him until his womb dried up. It had happened to omegan consorts before.

"Thank you," he said, carefully rolling up the document and re-tying the ribbon, setting it aside to protect it from breakfast. His tone had been just as careful.

"Now, our conversation can proceed unobstructed by paperwork." Will watched the king raise his fork to his mouth and noted the expression he made as he savored the taste, closing his eyes to enjoy it without distraction. It was sensual enough to spread warmth over Will's cheeks. He distracted himself by busily cleaning his plate. Everything was wonderful, as usual, and the conversation flowed more easily the longer they were together. Will found himself telling the king about Georgia's meeting the previous night, and their plan to expose Baron Komeda and his sister to their ideas.

"I'll find a messenger to take a copy to the manor where they'll be staying by the seaside," Hannibal suggested, watching Will finish off his tea. "Leave it in a clandestine place to be picked up and read."

"Where, the outhouse?" Will said, though it was through a smile.

"Tacked to the wall, perhaps. Otherwise, it might suffer a terrible fate."

Will laughed, leaning back in his chair. "Depends on their political point of view."

When he met the king's eyes again, Will was struck for a moment by the way they gleamed, glowing oak-maroon velvet in a way that suggested an amusement, affection, and something darker, a shard of possessiveness. Will was hit with a sudden surge of alpha pheromone. His hand curled tightly around the edge of the table as he averted his eyes and tried not to make it obvious how deeply he was breathing it in. Thunder rumbled outside and the window shook in its casement as it was buffeted by the wind.

"Shall we have a walk in the garden?" the king asked, with perfect dry irony.

It broke the spell and Will scoffed through a smile. "Absolutely."

"Would you accompany me to the library, then?" the king asked as they got to their feet, a lilt of hope threaded through his words.

Will tilted his head. "Don't you have, ah… meetings, councils, petition hearings…?"

"I was meant to attend the opening ceremonies of the Feast of Pharia. They've postponed it until the rain stops."

"Feast of Pharia?" Will furrowed his brow. "Pharia's an Old God."

"One of the oldest," the king agreed, crossing the small kitchen to open the door for Will. They stepped out into the deserted dining hall, where the rain was louder on the tall windows. He offered his arm and Will took it unthinkingly, his mind whirring through the myths of the religion that had preceded The Book. "Goddess of the growing season. She returns from the underworld each spring to grace the surface world with her warmth and flowers, then the

fruits of her womb. After the harvest, she shrivels into a crone, with straw hair and withered vines draping over her rotting body. Or so her faithful believe."

Will remembered the story. "You… Sovereign of Eidermark… were going to openly attend a ceremony honoring the Old Gods…?" They were walking now, their feet echoing over the marble flooring as Hannibal led them to the main staircase and the library on the second floor, the passing servants bowing deeply as they moved through the halls.

"Yes," Hannibal said, as if it were simple. "Eidermark is not a homogenous land. We border the Northern Wastes. Some of my people have strong ancestral ties to the nomadic culture there, though historical aggression from the tribes has encouraged them to keep their animist heritage hidden. And on some of the more isolated islands of our coast, the Book never came. There are pagan traditions alive and well. The Triumvirate preferred a state religion. It's my belief that Eidermark is stronger and more united through our differences."

Will's mind dug up misery from its deepest mine; a memory of Matthew, old enough now that his alphahood made him stronger than Will, even though Will was older, wrestling him to the ground and threatening to tie him to a stake like a heretic and burn him alive if he ever tattled again. A good portion of the curriculum Will had been taught by his clerical tutors revolved around the subjugation of the pagans and the Burning Times. The Regent had ordered a round of similar executions only three years before when a countess had accused her seamstress of sewing sigils into her clothing. Matthew had begged to attend and been granted permission, whereas Will wasn't allowed to, not that he would have wanted to go. Delicate omegan constitutions had to be protected.

Not from the corpses that lined the border of Eidermark, apparently. But it wasn't the same, somehow. When he thought of them now, he felt in his heart that they'd somehow deserved what had happened to them. It felt righteous, whereas everyone knew Countess Darian accused her seamstress of witchcraft because her husband had taken a fancy to the poor girl.

Perhaps the countess deserved to burn.

"The Church in Gaulemagne feels… differently," he said. "It's the largest landowner in the country and I wouldn't be surprised if it's richer than the crown at this point, considering how my cousin spends money. But, ah… tolerance of the Old Religion and animism isn't the same as… condoning it with your presence."

"A brief attendance. I'll eat a few strawberries from the first harvest, and then take my leave. I am condoning their freedom, not participating in their worship. Yet the message is clear – Eidermarks may believe in whatever capricious deity they choose. Shout differing names at the same deaf heavens."

Will's shock deepened as they reached the arched doors of the library, carved to look like a forest scene. The metal door handles were curved, crafted with exquisite realism to look like snakes slithering along the dark gleaming wood. There were ravens in the trees and stags wandering the undergrowth, with jewels embedded in the carving to serve as glittering eyes. To a casual observer, it was just another natural decoration displaying the animal symbols of the Lecter family. But Will saw it through the king's eyes now. It represented the Eternal Garden described in The Book, where the first humans had lived, the paradise they'd been

cast out of for asking too many questions of their creator. The library held knowledge that God didn't want his children to know, and to step through the doors was to actively disobey the Father.

And the golden pendulum in his mind told him that King Hannibal enjoyed it every time.

The room was two stories, built within a rounded tower redesigned from its ancient defensive use to hold a dozen windows that, even on this gloomy day, filled the space with light. The balcony above was crammed with shelves of books, accessible by a ladder. These were the older tomes, the ancient histories, and the painstaking records of legal cases and finances going back hundreds of years. The lower tier was for books people might actually *want* to read. And Will had been reading them, devouring them, ever since his arrival. There were so many he'd never even heard of. It was the most impressive collection on the continent, he'd wager. As much as he was loath to share his delights with anyone except Georgia, he couldn't suppress a smile upon stepping into the space.

A smaller room had been constructed within the cylindrical space, made of carved wood that matched the doors with the same motif. There was a grand fireplace in the library, but it struggled to heat the whole space. This room-within-a-room had a small wood stove with a surface for heating a tea kettle, and a wealth of comfortable chairs, cushions, and lounges, along with a small square table for spreading out maps. The ceiling of the structure had six large leaded glass skylights edged with stained glass. It was glorious on a brighter day, the warm colors of the stained glass mixing with the bright sunshine. It was Will's favorite part of Castle Lecter.

The stove was already warming the reading room. The king placed the kettle on its surface to heat and opened a built-in cabinet covered with carved vines to find the teapot and cups. This one was ceramic and had been crafted and painted to look like a stack of books with a handle and spout on either end. Whimsical.

"The deaf heavens," Will mused as he watched the king remove his ebony and gold damask jacket and roll up his shirtsleeves again. "You're… an atheist?" He spoke softly. He hadn't seen any servants in the library, but such an assertion was radical, to say the least.

"Not at all," the king replied, measuring tea leaves. "But I would say, privately of course, that it is presumptuous of humanity to assume they understand the powers that created us. That He speaks to us, performs miracles. The pagans are easier to understand. The evidence of their gods is all around us; the first strawberry harvest, the tulips."

"You're the Sovereign of Eidermark because of… God's choice," Will said carefully, leaning his hip against the side of a cushioned lounge.

"And you are a prince of Gaulemagne for the same reason." The king smiled up at him from where he was arranging the cups and saucers, a mischievous little smirk that made Will smile back instinctively. "At some point, God descended from on high to bless our bloodlines and give us power. Nothing at all to do with our ancestors ruthlessly amassing wealth and land and influence."

"Nothing, ah, whatsoever," Will agreed with a chuckle.

The king poured the tea into the pot and closed the lid to let it steep. “Nevertheless, here we are, playing our parts.”

“I’m not playing.” The feather-lightness of Will’s heart gained a sudden density.

“Removing yourself entirely from the stage is one way. Cast off the costume, deny the role.” Hannibal approached him now, edging around the table and closing the distance between them, his steps silent on the thick woven rugs that covered the floor in opulent red, gold, and black designs. There were periods of time where Will almost forgot the king’s alpha-ness, when he lost himself in the intellectual discourse. When he remembered, it always felt like dreaming of falling and jolting awake. Now was one of those times. “Or, you might revise the script. Change the story to suit you.”

“It’s still a show, a-an act.” Will insisted this to himself as well, as the alpha’s scent came to him, politely hidden as it was under the layer of gentle perfume.

“Lies are most convincing when shored up with truth.”

Thunder boomed outside again as the storm surged once more, loud enough to rattle the teacups in their saucers. Will flinched involuntarily, then found his gaze returning to the king’s. Hannibal’s eyes were antler velvet, and his aristocratic mouth was no longer so proud, curved instead into a tender smile. “Whose eyes do you have?”

“What?” Will asked, a brusque snap of a word.

“Your eyes. Your mother’s, I take it?”

Will nodded. When the king handed him his teacup, Will realized his hands were trembling just enough to be noticeable. He steeled himself and accepted the cup with what grace he could before fleeing back to the lounge. The king settled primly into one of the chairs at the table, steaming cup nearby.

People simply didn’t talk about Will’s parents. Partly to preserve his “delicate omegan constitution” and partly for superstition, that mentioning them would somehow conjure the tumultuous times Gaulemagne suffered in the wake of their deaths.

“Are you an atheist, Will? The way you said the word earlier lacked the usual shock and disdain.”

Will sipped his tea, not tasting it. “If there’s… an intelligence behind all of this, I don’t, ah… *presume* to understand it.”

“I enjoy ritual. There is something innately human about it, the idea that we can change our fate if the right offerings are given, and the prayers said. If you had to choose a deity, which would it be?”

Will adjusted the blue tunic at the neck and shifted on the cushions. “I suppose one of the Twelve Angels would… be palatable.”

The king’s eyes sparkled, but Will couldn’t be sure why. “Thirteen, you mean.”

“Depends on who’s counting.”

“And would you, like so many others, trust this higher power to show you a way out of the dark places when fate and circumstance send you there?”

“The last time I went into a dark place, I brought something back,” Will murmured, despite himself. Maybe it was the way Hannibal’s scent kept reaching out to him, curling, and billowing around him like smoke. *Alpha,* it whispered. *Protector.* He shouldn’t have agreed to a library visit, especially in the reading room where it was warm and close.

“A surrogate daughter?”

Will’s cup clanked back into its saucer. “Are you talking about… *Alana*?”

The king nodded before raising his cup to his lips again, studying Will over the silver rim.

Again, Will’s own cup made small mewls against the saucer as a tremor went through his body. There was a rushing sound in his ears, like he was trapped beneath a waterfall. He debated arguing, or simply walking out of the room without being properly dismissed but tamped both urges down. It was easier than he thought. He wanted to tell the story. It was a stone around his neck and, God or the Thirteen Angels help him, he wanted to set it down for a little while.

“They came… on the darkest night. The heart… the dark of winter,” Will said, looking down at the reflection of the latticed skylights that rested on the surface of his tea. “At the coldest hour. Dragged me out of my bed, my sister… M-Matthew’s nursemaid, she fought them off a-and barricaded herself in the nursery with him, but, ah…” A watery feeling gathered in the back of his jaw, and there were fleeting moments where he thought he might vomit. “The rest of-of us were in my parents’ bedchamber. They…” he swallowed hard against the feeling in his throat, “forced him to kneel. T-there were three of them, the rest of the rebels w-were fighting the guards and, ah…” He took a shaky breath.

“They forced him to kneel. A king, kneeling before a commoner.”

Hannibal knew more of the story than Will anticipated.

He knew about Hobbs.

“My mother wouldn’t let go of him. I-I thought she’d hold onto *us*.” Anger surged through him in an unexpected flood. “I don’t think they planned to kill her, too. But once they pulled out their knives… she was in the way, and then…”

“They might as well annihilate the entire family.”

Will took a gulp of tea, hoping it would settle his stomach. Nodded. “Jack, h-he’d used a grappling hook to get up onto the balcony and… it’s hard to remember, exactly, but the window broke open and he was there, fighting the other two. But H-hobbs, he grabbed my sister, and…”

Will glanced up at the king and suffered the snap of the empathy pulse without warning. While he wore a mask of sweet understanding, there was a glittery, jagged satisfaction beneath the surface, and a hunger that made Will's skin break out in gooseflesh. Will set down his cup and got swiftly to his feet, dizzy with the rush of alpha hormone pouring off the king, and the suffering dredged up from the past. "May I take my leave?"

"Will." His name was a diamond-hard command nestled in silk. The king rose as well, and Will's instincts screamed at him to obey. "What happened next?"

"You know," he growled. "Or you wouldn't have asked."

"I know what's whispered in courts across the Continent," the king replied, oozing serenity from his pores, approaching slowly to ensure he seemed nonthreatening. "I'd rather hear it from you."

There it was – the last unspoken reason why Chilton and everyone else implied that Will should be grateful for someone desiring his hand in marriage. While Chilton and the Crowned Council had done their best to suppress the story, it'd somehow gotten out, though Jack never would have told.

The truth was this: Prince William Graham of the House of Beauregard-Devereaux of Gaulemagne, an omega meant to be known for a sweet and nurturing temperament, had killed a man at the tender age of twelve.

"Jack called my name," Will heard himself say dully, studying the whorls and loops of the carpet's design, feeling them constricting all around him like twisting vines. "H-he parried an assassin's sword, a-and he tossed a knife on the bed. And I picked it up. I jumped on Hobbs. He tried… cutting her throat, Alana's throat, but he only grazed her because I hit him so hard and then… we were on the floor and I…" Will shivered, despite the warmth of the little room. "I can still feel the way the knife shuddered when I hit bone," he murmured, looking down at his palms. "I can still smell… the coppery scent of blood on my hands."

When he looked up, Hannibal was very near him, his scent invading so heavily Will wasn't sure how much longer he could stand it. "You saved your own life, and your sister's. You were orphaned together. It comes with certain emotional obligations. Did you feel paternal, Will?"

"I could ask you the same thing." Will turned and left the reading room without being dismissed, stepping through the heavy curtains that served as a door for the smaller structure. He went to one of the large windows and unlatched the casement, letting the rain-soaked air in, cold as it was. It was heaven against his cheeks and cleared his mind again.

Hannibal at his side, looking out over the sodden garden below. "You're not the only one who… asked around," Will said, holding out his hand to let the rain pelt it with chilly drops. "You have a sister, too. Your entire family was exiled to the Wastes, or so I was told. Then you came back and restored the throne from the Triumvirate, but… where are your parents? Where's your sister? Don't you feel obligated to bring them back to court? Or is it still too dangerous?"

Hannibal waited a moment before he answered, and Will's heart clenched, wondering if he was about to be thrown out the window for daring to mention the rest of the Lecter family. "I felt a staggering amount of obligation. I felt responsibility. And if they were alive, they would certainly have come home to me."

A pit opened in Will's stomach, bottomless, gaping.

"The exile to the Northern Wastes was a death sentence disguised as mercy," Hannibal told him. "The rest of the Continent was unaware. My father was killed outright, but the men who overthrew my family did so with some measure of civility. I don't think they meant for the rest of us to die."

"Your mother and sister... gone, then?"

The king smiled faintly, fondly. "Part of Mischa will always be with me." Then. "I've often fantasized about scenarios where my actions may have allowed a different fate for my sister."

"I had Alana, at least. You didn't have anybody," Will murmured, pulling his hand back in the window, letting the rain dribble down his hand and drip from his fingertips.

"Do you think of him often? The man who helped kill your parents? Tried to kill Alana?" The king withdrew a handkerchief of intricate lace from his pocket and lifted Will's rained-on hand, drying it gently. His touch was warm against Will's chilled skin and it spread all down his arm and pooled between his legs in a rush of instinctive longing.

"It… comes and goes…" Will dragged his bottom lip against his teeth, just for a moment. Thankfully, the king released his hand and tucked the handkerchief away. "A few years ago, at court, two alphas argued to the point where one attacked and killed the other right there in the palace. I saw it happen. Before they took me away, I saw the dead man on the floor. Gouged-out eyes, bashed in skull." Will closed his own eyes for a moment. "I saw Garret Jacob Hobbs there, instead of the dead courtier."

"Understandable. You displaced the victim of another killer with the man who could arguably be considered your victim."

Will opened his eyes and leveled the king with a glare. "I don't consider Hobbs my *victim*."

"What do you consider him?" the king asked, cocking his head to the side. A strand of dark hair moved across his forehead and Will tracked it keenly.

"Dead," Will said.

"Do you find it hard to imagine the thrill others might feel killing once you committed the act yourself?"

Will nodded quickly.

"And when you came through the gate in the carriage that brought you to my door, when you passed beneath the corpse of an executed criminal, did you see Hobbs then?"

“N-no.” Will’s mind served him an array of images of the criminal’s body as it rotted, infested with insects, and torn to pieces by the scavenger birds.

“Then it’s not Hobbs’ ghost that’s haunting you. It’s the inevitability of a man being so bad that killing him felt *good*.” Will started when the king took his hand again, clasping it between both of his own, warming it to the bones.

“Killing Hobbs felt *just*,” Will corrected him, unable to tear his eyes from the king’s dark gaze, darker now as the pupils went wide, ringed by a flash of alpha red.

“The sprig of zest you felt killing him,” Hannibal murmured softly. Even closer now. Will was terribly aware of the few inches that separated their faces, the alpha scent colonizing his body. “You’d like to believe it came from saving your sister, not from killing your parents’ assassin.”

“No,” Will denied. It sounded like a syllable of pure lie to his own ears, and knew Hannibal heard it, too.

“You’d rather not give voice to the unmentionable. You’ve been told all your life that an omega would never do such a thing. And yet, here you are. Alive, because he is dead. Your sister, alive, because of your actions. You know it was heroic, the same way your beloved General Arethusa was heroic, picking up the sword to defend your homeland. The holy omegan warrior.”

Will could only stare into his eyes, captured by the ring, which grew redder by the moment. Will’s breath quickened and the heat from Hannibal’s hands holding his brought a sheen of sweat to his brow.

I want him, his reptile mind hissed, a petulant whisper. *Let me have him. Burn it all down to have him…*

When the king let go of Will’s hand and cupped his cheek oh so gently, thumb smoothing back and around the shell of his ear, Will felt slick dampen his undergarment, pooling there uncomfortably between his legs. Hannibal must have smelled it; his nostrils gave a subtle flare and the ring of red in his eyes intensified. Will knew his own ring was visible, had to be, the omegan gold circling pupil and invading his blue-green iris.

“It wasn’t the act of killing Hobbs that got you down, was it?” the king asked, his tone mild, at odds with the undeniable tension that stretched between them, a fraying rope of control. “Did you really feel so bad that killing him felt so good?”

Will’s mind whirred, weighing the statement. He parted his lips and drew a tumbling breath into his lungs. Hannibal’s hand on his face felt simultaneously splendid and dangerous. “I liked killing Hobbs,” he whispered.

A low growl rumbled in Hannibal’s throat; a pleased purr threaded with want. “Killing must feel good to God, too. He does it all the time, and the Book says we are created in his image.”

“And the Old Gods?”

Hannibal smiled, a predatory slice. “Something divine dropped a temple roof on thirty-four Followers of Herophestis last week while they made wine in his name. Last year in Gaulemagne, you had a cathedral collapse.”

“Did God feel good about that?” Will breathed as Hannibal leaned closer, stroking his fingers back through Will’s hair.

“He felt powerful,” the king whispered over his lips.

Just before their mouths could touch, a voice rang out through the library from the doorway. “Sire? A messenger’s come from the High Priestess of Pharia.”

Hannibal released him immediately and they separated in the span of a breath. Randall was at the door, his mouth set in a thin line.

“Thank you, Randall.” Hannibal turned back to Will and bowed, a graceful motion despite the riot of scent he exuded that designated his own arousal. “I’m afraid I must attend to this matter, Your Highness.”

Will nodded. After he left, Will collapsed in a chair with a frustrated groan. He had to make a point of never letting his instincts get the better of him again. That meant no more unsupervised meetings in closed-in spaces.

“He felt powerful,” Will whispered, just over the sound of the drumming rain.

Treat a Work of Art Like a Prince

Chapter Summary

> Hannibal asks Will to use his empathy to read Lord Tobias during an official audience. When the subject of omegas' intellectual capacity arises, Will is compelled to speak. But first, he has to find a seat at the table.

Georgia was snoring. Well, breathing with a sort of congested snuffle, tucked up on the cushioned seat near the window of Will's sitting room. Ellie lay on the floor next to her, making similar sounds, grunting, and twitching every so often as she chased lizards in her dreams. Ellie dearly loved to chase lizards when they visited the southern coast of Gaulemagne, and to Will's knowledge, she'd never caught one. Not that it prevented her from trying, or, perhaps, dreaming of it.

"Alone at last," Hannibal said. The tone was soft and lighthearted, said through a subdued smile, but Will remembered his silent vow in the library – no more confined spaces without a chaperone. And yet, here he was, more than happy for a private word.

Will avoided his eyes, turning back to their work. Tomorrow, the king had a meeting with the headmasters of several academies of the capitol to report on the academic progress of Eidermark's youth, and, Hannibal assured him, ask for more money. Tonight, they were hard at work writing a pamphlet about omegan intellect and potential capability in an academic setting, which would be slipped secretly into a few sympathetic hands. The hours had flown by, and even with the extended daylight of summer, the sun had set.

"I see why you enjoy her company," Hannibal – for Will had begun thinking of him like this, as his given name, not as a crowned head – said as he picked up the small blade and sharpened a quill. Will liked to watch his hands when he did this; they were so clever and deft, and the way his tendons moved beneath his skin was captivating. "She's bright. One might say plucky."

"Wicked sense of humor," Will added, tearing his gaze away from Hannibal's hands to Georgia's sleeping form, sweetly ethereal in the moonlight even with the snoring. "Someday, when you're better acquainted, I'm sure she'll, ah… tell you some of her stable hand stories." Those who tended horses in Gaulemagne had a rich tradition of stories and songs that were told and sung during work. Some were sweetly sad, romantic, but most were hilariously crass, or centered around manure.

"I agree with the pagans," Hannibal said, setting down his pen and picking up their most recent draft, scanning the words, somehow able to read Will's cramped handwriting. "The horse is divine. All beasts of burden are sacred animals."

Will paused, wondering if he should ask the question that had been brewing in his mind. Perhaps it was the late hour, the intimacy of lamplight and the scattered candles that flickered in the periphery, giving the space a dreamlike quality, the unreality making him bold. “You’re a pagan, aren’t you.” Not a question, it seemed.

“Like you, I have a healthy disdain for all religion,” Hannibal told him, rising to pour them both an earthenware cup of cider, serving Will as if he was king instead. “I understand its original purpose – to explain the unexplainable.”

“Social control,” Will added. “Keep people in line.”

“Originally, I suspect, morality meant survival.” Hannibal reclaimed his chair next to Will at the table, angling it to face him, crossing his long legs. Will thought the slender black breeches and tall, shining boots must make them look longer than they were. He was glad, suddenly, that Georgia had suggested wearing a length of dark silk around his neck, holding closed the collar of his shirt. He’d thought she’d done so for aesthetic reasons, tying the dark green cloth into a fashionable looped knot, but now he was sure it was dampening his scent. It felt like an added layer of protection, as flimsy as it was.

“Survival?” he asked, trying to shake himself out of the reverie of admiration.

“In times long past, when our ancestors painted their lives on cave walls, we lived in constant danger. From the elements and beasts, surely, but from one another as well. If a society agrees on a set of acceptable behaviors, it strengthens the group, wouldn’t you agree? Important, when one relies on others for survival.”

Will nodded. “Until the… rival clan from the next cave over shows up with a different set of gods.”

Hannibal smiled with a slight nod. “To answer your question, I find the rites and rituals of worship fulfill a need for me. Whether or not a divine ear listens to our prayers, I can’t say. Faith, then, does not compel me. But I find the act of worship itself comforting. Exhilarating, even.”

“You find mass exhilarating?” Will asked with a raised brow, leaning an elbow on the table.

“Not mass, no. I worship in private with a few trusted companions.”

“And…?”

Hannibal looked at him but didn’t speak further.

“And which deity…?” Will tried again, hoping he’d pick up the prompt.

“One of the headmasters attending the meeting tomorrow participates in my rituals,” Hannibal said. It was such an effective evasion that Will was simultaneously annoyed and impressed. “Baroness Komeda and her husband oversee the School of Art. She specializes in drawing and painting, and he is master of the workshop, where he trains sculptors, weavers, woodworkers. The Baroness painted the portrait I sent you.”

Will thought back to Georgia admiring the small portrait, and how he'd refused to look at it. Now, it lived in a drawer at his bedside, and he looked at it more often than he cared to admit.

"It's, uhm… a good likeness." He felt a heated blush spread over his face, and got up from his chair, quickly enough that the sound made Ellie raise her head. "I'm satisfied with this last draft. You're right, there were sections that needed… a lighter touch."

"More flies with honey," Hannibal reminded him, getting to his feet as well. "Sensing the sweetness, they land, and are trapped. Then you can decide what to do with them at your leisure."

Will scoffed quietly, shaking his head. "I'm just… impatient, I guess." He drained his cider and set the glass aside. "I want to see change in my lifetime."

"You will," Hannibal vowed, and the flower of Will's heart opened, another petal curling toward the sun. "You're determined. Brilliant. The passion in your words is undoubtedly moving. They were my first sense of you, before seeing you in the flesh."

"It's… warm," Will said, his heart beating on his ribs like a dazed fly trying to escape a window and bashing itself into the glass over and over despite the casement being open. "In here–"

"Let us take the air, then." Hannibal set down his cup and held out a hand.

Will's instinct staged a coup and slaughtered his good sense all too easily. He slid his flushed palm into Hannibal's cool, dry grip. *Alpha,* his body pleaded the second their skin touched.

Hannibal escorted him to the terrace, and they stepped out into the cool night air, looking out over the waters that surrounded the castle and the faint lights burning through the deep blue dark. Close to midnight, and the horizon still glowed with the faint traces of sun. Will was refreshed, and the open air diluted Hannibal's scent enough to think clearly. "I'd like your help with something," Hannibal said as they leaned against the stone railing, their shoulders less than an inch apart. Will was terribly aware of that space as the night wind rustled the white sleeves of their respective shirts.

"My help?" he repeated, unsure if he'd heard the king's words correctly.

Hannibal nodded. "You have an uncanny ability to see what others might hide, from themselves or the world. I'd like you to attend the education meeting with me."

Will's eyes widened and he turned, stepping back in surprise. They weren't even married yet. Besides, a royal omega's place was to bear children, not become involved with matters of state. The implications of the invitation amazed him into silence.

"Lord Tobias will be there. Master of our music academy and one of my trusted advisers. I want you to watch him and make sure my trust is not misplaced."

“Do you have… reason to suspect him of… some treachery?” Will stammered, still recovering from the shock of being allowed to attend the meeting.

“I want your observations to be unclouded with my suspicions. Will you come?”

“O-of course I will. Yes. Th-thank you, yes.” He realized he was repeating himself and clammed up.

“I’m afraid it may involve subterfuge,” Hannibal warned him as they turned back to the view afforded by the terrace. “Your presence will have to be explained in a way that minimizes the real reason for it. Will you follow my lead as necessary?”

Will nodded. “Y-yes, I will.”

“Remember. Honey, not vinegar.” His eyes roamed down from Will’s face to the cravat that held his shirt closed. Reaching out, he pulled at one end of the knot. The silk slid easily against itself, serpentine. Will’s breath caught as the knot collapsed in a whisper of fine fabric, the coils loosening. “You’ll want to dress to greet honored visitors,” the king said softly, edging closer, his fingers closing around the length of silk. Will leaned his head back, but his movement was arrested by a gentle pull that brought his heart into his throat, and his hands up, instinctively finding Hannibal’s sides with a fluttering touch against his shirt.

Hannibal’s other hand cupped his cheek, then luxuriated in a slow stroke through Will’s curls. He leaned in and breathed in Will’s scent just above the loosened cravat. Will unconsciously uttered a soft omegan whimper he didn’t have the good sense to be ashamed of. His entire world was the alpha, his alpha, touching his face and stroking his hair, eradicating the memory of any other touch he’d ever felt. Will leaned into his hand, breathing harder now, captivated by the red ring in Hannibal’s eyes that expanded, darkly luminous beneath the night sky.

“Please,” the king whispered.

Will wasn’t sure what he was begging for, but he nodded. Anything he had, instinct demanded he give.

Hannibal pulled him just a little closer by the cravat and brought their lips together.

Will ceased to exist. Gaulemagne and Eidermark ceased to exist. The outside world was meaningless. There was only the kiss, gently closed-mouthed for a long, sweet moment, before their mouths eased open against one another’s lips, wider and wider with each delicious press. Alpha and omega, omega and alpha…

The tip of Hannibal’s tongue had just touched his when there was a loud cough from the terrace doorway. Georgia stood in the doorframe with her arms crossed over her chest, a hip cocked, an eyebrow raised. She didn’t speak – it wasn’t her place to give an order, but the message was clear. *Do I need to run off and find Jack?*

Hannibal released him with a kind of lingering immediacy that felt possessive and reluctant but kept their hands together. Will felt like a slab of butter in a hot pan, melting down to

nothing before browning and burning. Hannibal, on the other hand, had a smile on his face that was sweet on one side of his mouth and downright cocky on the other. “Goodnight, Your Highness,” he said, emphasizing the formality of the goodbye.

Decorum insisted that Will respond, but he found he couldn’t. Hannibal’s hands released his. Georgia stepped out of the way with a bow, and the king disappeared inside. It wasn’t until they heard the chamber door shut that either of them moved. Georgia went back into the bedchamber, leaving Will alone on the terrace. He took a moment to recover, then came back in, his face still burning. She was laying out his nightshirt and turning down his bed covers like nothing at all had happened, excepting, of course, the smirk on her face she apparently couldn’t hide.

Will poured himself a glass of strong apple brandy and bolted it, then filled the glass again. “Well?” he demanded brusquely as she approached him now to unwind the loose silk from his throat.

“Well, what?” Her laughter bubbled under the surface of her words, a hair’s breadth from erupting.

“Just say it,” he groaned as she folded the silk and replaced it in his bureau.

“You’re engaged. There’s nothing wrong with a few stolen kisses. Maybe more, as long as you don’t get pregnant before the wedding.”

“Oh, for God’s–!” he pressed his hands against his sweating forehead and rubbed his face.

“You can’t blame me for finding humor in the irony,” she insisted, pushing him down on a chair to pull off his boots. “Refused his gifts, wouldn’t even look at his portrait…”

“Stop,” he pleaded. “I sh-shouldn’t… shouldn’t have…”

“Oh, Will,” Georgia murmured, kneeling at his side, and putting a hand over his, her touch soothing. He knew she knew him well enough to understand that his ire didn’t come from having a taste of what was promised before the wedding night; he burned with shame for betraying his ideals. Playing along with his enslavement. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have made fun. Listen, just because you got lucky and happen to like the alpha you’re being forced to marry doesn’t mean you can’t keep fighting for omegas like… like that poor princess of Lothien, shipped off to Tsar Abel’s court, or all the countless others being bought and sold every day across the continent. You’re not betraying anything, Will. I thank God you’ve taken a liking to him, and why wouldn’t you? He believes what you believe, and I think he truly cares about you beyond your womb.”

Will sighed a heavy, put-upon sigh, leaning his head back on the chair and looking at the celestial mural painted on the ceiling. Perhaps the stars had arranged it all, as improbable as it seemed.

“Pretend you grew up… as the son of a book binder, say. And one day, a customer enters the shop, and the king… he’s just a butcher from down the road looking for a book, and the two

of you get to talking and he asks to see you again, would you have said yes? Maybe you're both betas, and instinct has no bearing on the situation. Would you accept?"

"I…" Will rubbed his face again. "Georgia–"

"I think you would!" she insisted. "He's a brilliant mind, someone who can keep up with you, Will! He's… sensitive and kind, and he rules a prosperous country where the people seem happy. His manners are perfect, and…" She stood up, flapping her hands against her sides in a gesture of surrender. "It's understandable, is all I'm saying. There's no shame in it. So get to bed and stop berating yourself this instant, you hear me?"

He took her outstretched hand and got to his feet, letting her help him with his nightshirt, even though he didn't need the assistance. Before she blew out the last lamp and retired to her small adjoining chamber, Georgia flopped down on the end of his bed, her eyes shining with mischief. "Was he a good kisser?" she whispered, as if someone might overhear.

He picked up a pillow and threw it at her. She giggled madly, lifting her arms to deflect it, then tossed it back at him.

"Yes," he admitted, then threw it at her again when she burst into peals of laughter.

The meeting with the academy headmasters was scheduled for mid afternoon. Their guests were served a light repast and were then to meet the king in his council chamber. Will arrived beforehand, glad that the airy room's windows were open and facing north, providing plenty of natural light without being heated directly by the sun. His forehead was already threatening to bead up with sweat, though he wasn't sure if it was in anticipation of seeing Hannibal again, or of their plan to slip sympathetic attendees hastily made copies of the omegan rights pamphlet they'd perfected the night before. In all the excitement, he'd nearly forgotten about his promise to observe Lord Tobias as Hannibal had requested.

Several pageboys bustled about, setting out writing supplies and providing each seat at the table with an etched crystal drinking glass for the cider waiting on the sideboard. There was a cushioned chair in the corner next to the window, with a few books stacked on a small table next to it. Hannibal was facing said window, hands clasped behind his back. He was wearing a pristine white shirt with sleeves edged in lace, and a long waistcoat striped with red and dark blue, embroidered all over with gold damask designs. It was a touch more elegant than his daily wear, denoting the importance of the meeting.

Will had followed Hannibal's suggestion regarding dress, and was smartly attired in pale gold breeches, a white shirt not unlike Hannibal's, though it had a strip of lace down either sleeve from shoulder to wrist that revealed hints of the skin beneath. Over this, he wore a short waistcoat of sky-blue silk that laced up the front as well as the back, contouring to his body. While Hannibal's went up to his neck and had a short but stiff collar, Will's had a V-shaped neckline, though it was modest enough for polite company while making his omegan silhouette evident. The neck of the shirt covered everything up to his chin and was held closed by an intricate silver brooch with a sapphire dangling from its bottom point.

The king turned when he heard the door, and Will saw the red ring in his eyes flare, fuelled by a kind of greedy instinct. A breath, and his irises were brown again. “Good morning.”

“Your Majesty,” Will greeted formally, as there were servants present; Randall scuttled about checking the stacks of papers at each place. Hannibal would sit at the head of the table, of course, and Will assumed he’d be at the king’s right hand. But that was not the case.

“Is this to your liking?” Hannibal gestured to the cushioned chair and footstool near the window.

Will approached and stood close enough to speak softly. “Why would I be…” He glanced from the table to the chair, which was close enough to be privy to the conversation, and had an unimpeded view of the proceedings, but wasn’t meant to imply the person sitting there was part of the meeting.

“Remember what we discussed,” Hannibal reminded him. “Honey.”

For a second, Will thought he was using a pet name. It made him rigid with indignation, though it also sent a throb pulsing through his groin. “Follow your lead?” he asked tightly.

Hannibal nodded. “Trust me.” He reached out and took Will by the shoulders. Will bit his lip to stifle any sharp words. Or little omegan sounds that might erupt unbidden. The king brushed an invisible speck of something from the shoulder of Will’s waistcoat, adjusting one sleeve to show off more of the lace stripe, then brought his hands up to Will’s throat. He held his breath as the king unfastened the brooch. He handed it to Will and eased open the fabric, folding it down around his collarbone and spreading the fabric to expose more skin. Will saw his nostrils flare. The king indulged in a deep breath of scent, closing his eyes. When he opened them, the red ring had spread itself again, unfurling around his pupil.

“Ah–!” Will dropped the brooch. He’d unconsciously closed his hand too tightly around it, driving the point of the pin into the tip of the ring finger on his left hand. A servant scrambled to pick it up and turn it over to the king.

Hannibal pocketed the pin and lifted Will’s hand, inspecting the puncture and the small ruby bead of blood that glowed faintly in the sunlight coming from the window next to them. Will pulled his hand free and raised his finger to his mouth, an instinctive action. Hannibal caught his wrist, staring at the wound with a ravenous look etched on his features. Time was fluid, a river flooding and receding, and Will was a helpless victim of its current. There was a rushing silence in his ears, deafening, as the king turned their bodies slightly, positioning their backs to the table to fully face the windows. Will watched, rapt, a prisoner of his instinct and the pooling heat between his legs, as Hannibal raised Will’s hand to his mouth and gently sucked on his injured finger.

Will immolated, his eyes no doubt flashing gold, heat pulsing through his body and centering in his loins.

It was then when a page announced the headmasters’ entry, and the doors opened to admit a well-dressed group of alphas and betas. Hannibal turned, dropping Will’s hand as if nothing

had happened, and stood behind his chair at the head of the table. “Welcome,” he greeted as they bowed to him. “I trust you enjoyed your meal?”

Murmurs of agreement. “Very much, Your Majesty,” a thin woman with short black hair cut bluntly across her forehead assured him with an adoring smile. Her eyes flickered to Will and opened wider in surprise, and she wasn’t the only one; Will’s mind pulsed, showing him a brief thread of gold, revealing the surprise evident in each of their faces. Annoyance, also, in some, Lord Tobias being one of them. The two other alphas – head of the Maths and Sciences institute and the architect’s academy, respectively – immediately homed in on Will, stopping in their tracks, their eyes darkening.

Hannibal slid a possessive arm around Will’s waist for a moment, locking eyes with each of them in turn. A few tense moments passed until they composed themselves and stood in front of their assigned chairs at the table, a servant hurrying to pour each guest cider from the provided pitcher.

Will felt a kind of golden delight fill his body like a ray of liquid sunshine. As Hannibal released his waist and held only his hand now, smiling softly at him, Will reveled in the feeling. He knew it was nothing more than an instinctive reaction to being protected by an alpha. He’d felt something similar in the past when Jack had protected him in one way or another from other alphas. But he’d never experienced it on this scale before, and he felt like the others in the room could see his face glowing.

“Forgive me, Your Majesty.” It was Lord Turner of the architecture academy who spoke first. “If I’d known your…” He took a brief but flustered breath. “If I’d known His Highness was to attend, I would have worn a mask.”

“Nothing to forgive,” Hannibal soothed. “This was unplanned. It seems my intended has grown attached to me. I couldn’t bear to cause him distress.”

Will’s golden feeling was gone in a flash when he realized the implication. Hannibal was playing it off like Will was so smitten with him that he’d demanded, – like a bratty child or lovesick omega, slave to his passions – to remain at his side even as the king conducted his official business.

Trust me.

Will’s empathy caught the expressions of those around the table and interpreted them within seconds. And he used it, twisted it around and added it to his arsenal. Part of him felt slimy and serpentine doing it, coiled with guilt, but another liked the taste of manipulation just fine. “I’m the one that ought to ask forgiveness,” he said, lowering his eyes demurely, clasping Hannibal’s hand in both of his own. “His Majesty has been kind enough to indulge me.”

Hannibal raised Will’s clasped hands to his mouth and kissed his knuckles, first one hand, then the other. Upon release, Will bowed his head for a moment of deference, then took his place on the cushioned chair. Hannibal sat at the head of the table, which signaled the academy masters that they could now take their seats and the meeting could begin.

Will kept quiet, picking up a book and leafing through it while keeping his expression neutral, bored even. Nothing to see here, just an omega waiting patiently for his alpha to pay attention to him again. Will secretly studied each person at the table before focusing in on Lord Tobias, as Hannibal had requested. Turner ran the architecture school, and the other alpha was Lord Caldwell of Maths and Sciences. Both seemed to even out after the meeting began. Will's scent dissipated as his arousal calmed, aided by the pair of open windows that created a cross breeze.

Baron and Baroness Komeda of the Academy of Arts sat next to Lord Sutcliffe the elder, father of the doctor who had examined Will's virginity, and head of the Physicians College. That left the headmistress of the Academy of Languages, Lady Greene, and Lord Murray, who ran the Great Archive, Eidermark's national library, where students were trained in the study of history, as well as the creation and preservation of books and manuscripts.

The education assembly began giving an overview of each schools' accomplishments in turn, naming notable students and recent projects, each of them sure to mention that so much more could be achieved if only the crown would fund their work. Will studied Lord Tobias with hidden glances, noting his body language, and listening to his voice when looking wasn't prudent. Will kept his eyes on his book most of the time, not reading the words, flipping pages every so often, focused on everything the headmaster of the music school said.

"Lord Tobias," Hannibal addressed him as the headmaster finished his report. "I want to take a moment to thank you and your students for performing my composition in honor of the prince's arrival. I'm told it was beautifully done."

Will's mind conjured the music, the notes swirling through his head and filling his body with that same golden light. Hannibal had *written* that song. For him.

The melody faded off as he studied the interaction, free to look now that they were talking about him. As Lord Tobias thanked the king, he paid no attention to Will whatsoever. Didn't ask him what he thought, didn't even look at him. Why ask a decorative object what it thought of a song? Will let the golden pendulum push the anger aside, a horse's tail brushing away flies. Lord Tobias's smiles and praise of the king's musical talent seemed genuine, but there was an edge to them that felt… forced. Will thought of a cake that had been in the oven too long – fluffy and light in the center, but hard and bitter at the edges where the pan had gotten too hot. At first glance or first bite, the piece might taste perfectly delicious. It wouldn't be until later that the burnt bits would be revealed.

Will glanced under the table and saw Lord Tobias's legs were rigid instead of casually crossed like others' were, at the ankle or the knee or spread in a pose of comfort. Not only that, even though he sat on Hannibal's right side, between the Komedas and the elder Dr. Sutcliffe, his feet were slightly angled away from the king, making him twist his body and rest his elbow on the chair's arm when speaking to him directly. The angle became more pronounced when Hannibal praised the school's instrument workshop and the sound created by their specially made catgut strings.

Also, he was the only headmaster who said nothing about money, which Will didn't understand, but seemed strange.

“Your Majesty,” Baroness Komeda was saying now. “You remember our conversation when I painted the portrait to send to your charming Prince William?”

“We spoke of many things.”

“One of which was a desire for further collaboration between our schools,” she reminded him, “beyond the studies that are more naturally harmonious with one another. I took your advice to heart, and have a student working with one of Lord Caldwell’s, applying principles of chemistry and alchemical study to the composition of paints and the substances used to create color.”

She smiled encouragingly at Caldwell, and paused, giving him space to chime in. He gave a small sigh and smiled at her the way one might look at a child one is struggling to find patience with. “Yes,” he admitted. “Though I have my doubts as to their chances of success finding anything useful.”

“Have faith, my lord!” Baroness Komeda chided. “Just last week they tested a new batch. It’s all very scientific, you see – they apply the paint to a variety of surfaces and expose it to various elements: sunlight, water, heat. Then they record their results and make adjustments.”

“A worthy endeavor, and well executed,” Hannibal complimented. “Why do you hesitate to celebrate it, Lord Caldwell?”

“Baroness Komeda’s student is Lady Halloran’s youngest,” he said with a dismissive wave. “Admitted to the academy only after a hefty donation, isn’t that so?”

Baroness Komeda stiffened, but she didn’t refute it. “It is… customary for the parents of gifted omegas to donate to the academy. Just ask Lord Tobias. Or Lady Greene – you have two or three, don’t you?”

“The Halloran omega dabbled in painting as a hobby,” Caldwell said, lips curled in open disdain. “Something to keep her pretty little hands occupied. Her mother seems to think she has talent and aptitude, and Baroness Komeda agreed, provided a generous donation was paid.”

“Lady Helena Halloran passed the entrance examination with flying colors, if you’ll pardon the phrase,” Baroness Komeda insisted. “Her portfolio was viewed blindly by our selection committee, as is protocol. They had no idea an omega created those works, and she was admitted based on her merits as an artist. Now, she’s showing promise in the wedding of science and art, while you want to keep her collaborator away from my studio!”

“Dorete Leeds is an alpha,” Caldwell argued, his eyes glittering. “And a very promising chemist. This messing about with paints of all things, with an *omega* – it’s a waste of her time.”

Will’s fury grew with each passing second. Pamphlets be damned. He’d tear Caldwell’s throat out with his teeth. Imagine the surprise shown by those thick, ugly eyebrows…

Hannibal glanced at him, just a momentary meeting of their gazes. The message was clear. *Patience. Discretion.*

Will took a second to calm down, burying his nose in his book. Then, he thought of honey.

A servant stepped forward to refill glasses even as the debate heated up. “I can assure you, they are well supervised,” Baron Komeda chimed in. “And Miss Leeds is always masked. It’s never been a problem, a *whisper* of a problem.”

“Oh please, why else would a brilliant mind like hers want to spend so much time with an omega pretending to be a serious artist?”

Will stood and quietly intercepted the servant before she could refill Hannibal’s chalice. “Please, let me,” he whispered, and she nodded with a smile, handing him the pitcher of cider before drifting to the far corner of the room until she might be needed again.

Will stepped up to Hannibal’s right side, sliding between his chair and Baroness Komeda’s. He felt every eye in the room lock onto his movements, and listened to the otherworldly pulse in his mind, using it to arrange his features just so, and inform his movements. Leaning in, he placed one hand on Hannibal’s shoulder, fingers brushing the back of his neck, and refilled his glass, giving his king a loving caress. “Forgive me,” he addressed the group, nodding to the servant, who hustled over to take the pitcher from him and continue refilling glasses.

Everyone nodded benevolently. It was an omega’s instinct, of course, to be near his alpha as often as possible, to serve and submit. And that assumption was what Will used to his advantage. “If I may,” Will added, despite Hannibal catching his hand and planting a kiss on it with his plush lips, an innocent touch that radiated passion and possessiveness. “I thought, perhaps, as an omega, I might be able to help Baroness Komeda and Lord Caldwell with their disagreement by providing my personal insight.” He spoke in his princely voice, flipping the switch that denied his lips any chance of stuttering and filled his lungs with nobility.

Everyone laughed and smiled with soft benevolence or sweet condescension, except Hannibal, who gazed up at him with an adoring curiosity, bright eyed, rapt. “Your Highness,” Lord Caldwell said. “Thank you for your interest in our discussion, but I’m unsure how you might assist in settling the matter.”

“Let him speak,” Baroness Komeda urged the group, “if for no other reason than he is our beloved prince.”

“What a pity,” Lord Caldwell said, his thick brows upturned in mocking concern. “His Highness has no seat at this table.”

The double meaning was clear as a mountain stream filled with melted snow. Rage curled through Will, and he imagined himself picking up Hannibal’s chalice, breaking it against the table, and jamming the jagged end into the alpha’s throat. Wouldn’t he be surprised, gurgling on his own blood, to know a pretty little omega had slit his throat?

Will looked at Hannibal, whose face betrayed nothing, though his eyes sparkled. He pulled his hand free of Hannibal's grip and ran the backs of his fingers down the king's smooth, sharply cut cheekbone with a coquettish little smile. Then he slid around the thick arms of the wooden chair and plopped himself in Hannibal's lap. The king let him adjust himself to his comfort, straddling one thigh, before slipping his arm around Will's waist and drawing him closer.

"There," Will said, smiling at Lord Caldwell. "Now I have a seat at the table."

Laughter, though Caldwell glared, the ring around his pupil flashing red again. Tobias smiled, but it looked more like a sneer, directed at Hannibal, however, for indulging this kind of behavior.

"It seems to me," Will said, "that Lady Halloran is, perhaps, the most serious artist of all under Baroness Komeda's care."

"How so?" Caldwell demanded.

"She has an aptitude for science, evidenced by her experimentation. She seeks to better the materials needed to create art, which in turn would impact every painter at the academy. And as I'm sure you know, quests for knowledge often reveal the unexpected. Her work with Miss Leeds could uncover something with an even wider scope."

"That may be," Caldwell shot back, "but much more could be discovered if Miss Leeds applied herself to her correct field of study."

"His Majesty's request for collaboration requires the brightest from each academy to connect their disciplines," Will argued. His words nearly faltered when Hannibal's arm tightened around his waist, drawing him closer, leaning forward until Will could feel his breath on the back of his neck. Was he trying to distract Will from the debate?

"The brightest? The best students?" Caldwell scoffed. "I don't see how. Our most promising students should be free of distractions, working to further their own fields."

Hannibal's other hand slipped under the table, and Will ran his teeth over the inside of his lower lip as it settled on his thigh, spreading wide. Will could feel the individual press of each finger burning through the cloth of his breeches. "What makes a student gifted above all others?" Will asked, ignoring the stimulation as best he could. "I open my question to the group. How do you know a student has a higher capacity…" he paused, biting back the little whine in his throat as Hannibal's fingertips slid around the meat of his thigh and brushed the inseam of his breeches. "… than others?" he finished.

The group looked at one another, unprepared to answer the question. "Talent," Tobias said at last, crossing his arms over his dark blue velvet tunic. "In music, the best students are diligent. Stubborn. They will practice until it's perfect."

"Intelligence," Lord Murray said. "A promising child learns quickly."

“Memory,” Lord Sutcliffe the elder supplied. “He’s committed his learning to memory, knows how to diagnose accurately and how to treat the ailment.”

“Creativity,” Baron Komeda interjected. “To make something that is novel. Combining ideas in new ways, trying something different.”

“Ah,” Will said, gesturing to the Baron. “I would argue that, using the Baron’s definition, creativity is required for success at each of your schools.”

Caldwell scoffed again. “Creativity? That’s something for coming up with a pretty new tapestry to weave or how a woman might put ribbons in her hair.”

Will smiled at him. Honey oozed on his next words, concealing the poison beneath with a layer of sweet amber. “Creativity, we’ve agreed, is trying something different. Combining ideas, drawing from multiple sources in order to create something new. Is your argument that your aspiring scientists have no need for this ability? How else can discovery occur?”

The hand on his thigh grazed up higher, Hannibal’s little finger just touching the seam that separated Will’s cock from the outside world. Hannibal shifted his other hand from Will’s hip to spread it flat against his belly, feeling its plane through the silk of his vest, his motions hopefully hidden by the table.

“In architecture, for instance,” Will barreled on, directing this at the other alpha and ignoring the subtle flare of his red ring, “creativity is far more than deciding how to decorate the building once constructed. Otherwise, you’re arguing that Jacques Brunetti used no creativity when answering Gaulemagne’s challenge to construct the largest domed cathedral on the continent.”

Hannibal shifted him slightly further back via the hand on his stomach and Will obliged automatically as he stared down his dissenters. A subtle squirm and he could feel the king’s cock pressing against him, straining up through his clothes. Will bit the inside his cheek, then touched the ends of his front teeth against the seam of his lower lip. “Is that what you’re arguing?” he asked, surprised at how level his voice sounded.

“What does this have to do with my student wasting her time?” Caldwell demanded, leaning back in his chair, and crossing his arms, oozing irritation.

“Combining new and novel ideas, finding a way to wed science and art, is an ultimate act of creativity,” Will said, half his mind in the moment of his argument, and the other aware of the dampness of his undergarment. “Thus, Lady Halloran is, by our shared definition, creative, which means she possesses a gifted mind, whatever skill she has with the paintbrush. And if we accept that to be true, we accept that omegas have the same capacity and potential as anyone else.”

The table fell into a hush, all eyes on Caldwell as he grew redder in the face. His defense response was to laugh as if it was the funniest thing he’d ever heard, but no one joined in, even when he heartily slapped Lord Murray on the shoulder. Budge glowered, but Sutcliffe had a perplexed look on his face as if considering. Will knew in his bones he’d made an impression. And with the pamphlets going out, some of the academies might actually

consider admitting omegas on an equal basis, not just when their wealthy families paid handsomely for their admission.

“I’m afraid that’s all the time we have,” Hannibal said, taking his hand from Will’s thigh to give them all a dismissive wave. “Leave your requested sums here and I will send word of my funding decisions.”

Will moved to stand, but the hand on his stomach tightened, gripping him around the waist like an iron band. Everyone waited for the king to stand to dismiss them, but Hannibal didn’t move. Again, he repeated the dismissive gesture with his hand, and Lady Komeda dared to be the first one to obey. Upon her movement, the rest followed, bowing, bidding the two of them good day. Will shot the serving girl a look, and she followed them out, shutting the door behind.

The second the door to the meeting chamber was closed, the king growled, hauling Will back against his chest with an even tighter grip. Will reached back to grip him by the hair, gasping as the king’s mouth came down on his neck and worked its way up around the corner of his jaw and to his lips. Hannibal’s hands roamed greedily as the growl in his chest vibrated through Will’s back where they touched. Will moaned, the wanton sound echoing off the panes of glass behind them, when Hannibal’s hand stroked up his thigh and between his legs, fondling the bulge of cock, then pressing the pads of his fingers against the wet spot behind it that Will could feel growing in size.

He broke the kiss, whispering mouth-hot praises into Will’s ear as he shifted to press his cock against Will’s cleft through the maddening layers of fabric between them. “You were perfect,” he growled. “You were brilliant–”

The doorknob to the chamber rattled and turned. Will cursed, vile as a harbormaster or a stable hand as Hannibal quickly stood, though he kept an arm looped around Will’s middle.

The interrupter was Randall, the Royal Secretary. He stopped dead in his tracks for an awkward frozen moment. Then, he cleared his throat. “Excuse me, Your Majesty, Your Highness – I came to gather the paperwork.”

“By all means.” Hannibal released Will with slow reluctance. When Will faced him, he could see the red ring in his eyes was nearly obscured by the onyx pools of his blown-wide pupils. His scent was intoxicating. It was a miracle Will had the strength not to lean in and bury his face in the alpha’s neck.

Hannibal raised Will’s hand to his mouth and kissed it delicately, even as his eyes gleamed with unsatisfied hunger.

Will inched closer, dropping his voice to a whisper, assuming Randall would think the message was no more than sweet nothings between lovers. “You, uhm… you can’t trust Lord Tobias. He despises you.”

Hannibal blinked in response, a bemused expression crossing his face. Then he kissed Will’s knuckles once more before letting him go. “Breakfast tomorrow?”

“Wouldn’t miss it.”

Never Give a Sword to One Who Can't Dance

Chapter Summary

> The king and his prince make a public appearance at a hay-mowing festival honoring the Soil Mother; Hannibal is consumed with thoughts of fertility, and plowing of a different kind.

Will walks at my side, greeting the pagans as we pass, as well as the Book-followers who have gathered here as well, conveniently forgetting what their sacred text says about idolatry. His hand curled in mine, the fair breeze wafting the scent of flowers and freshly mown hay, mixing with his unique scent, is pure heaven. His omegan essence is a treasure I've come to crave, so much so that I haven't given the trousers I wore the day he sat on my lap to the laundresses. I keep them in my pillowcase and bury my face in them before I go to sleep, and in the morning when I wake up, cherishing the small transference of slick.

Summer will be over sooner than many would care to admit, and while the changing seasons always bring me comfort, I'll miss the warmer weather. It encourages him to dress like he has today. This hay-mowing celebration will repeat itself at least once more before the season is over, so it is a casual affair, relaxing his wardrobe further, and he's resplendent in simple tan trousers, boots, and a thin linen shirt open at the neck. The collar, cuffs, and a strip down the middle are all intricate with lace, though the adornment is subtle, carefully applied.

Around his neck is a thin angel's blood chain. From it hangs a delicate feathered wing, curved like a comma. To the untrained eye, it could be a bird's wing, or something to represent the terrifying celestial beings discussed in The Book, masses of eyes and feathers that are presumptuous enough to demand that mortals in their presence "be not afraid." But he knows what it signifies as well as I do. It represents the Eirene, angel-daughters of Lumeria, sacred protectors of omegas. What he might not yet understand is that I also meant it to honor their dark sister, my household goddess. Moragnethe, the Corpse-Angel.

Most importantly, it is a gift from me that he accepted. That he's wearing.

The mown hayfield has been transformed for the festival to honor Oldata the Soil-Mother and thank her for coaxing her fellow gods to offer the perfect balance of rain and sun. The hay from this field will not be fed to the livestock, however – it has been gathered and shaped with twine, woven into life-size pigs, sheep, and goats, decorated with flowers and green, blue, and golden-brown ribbons. Merchants have come with their tables and small tents, offering sweets, trinkets, perfumes and oils, lace, and the traditional woven straw baskets, mats, and intricately braided wreaths. They make all kinds of decorations, principally Oldata's Cross, an equal-armed symbol representing the four seasons and decorated with dried flowers, fragrant herbs, and her signature ribbon colors.

The Temple of Oldata has taken a page from the Church's book and is making a tidy profit from the event, selling sweet wines kept cold with ice harvested in the winter and preserved until needed to cool the large chests full of sweating bottles. Their herbalists also offer small doses of a tea brewed from the same species of mushrooms many followers of the Old Gods use to alter the mind, gently in this case. The potion brewed by my coven is far more potent, and we have our own garden near the cave where the fungi are cultivated by Eldon the Hermit, a holy recluse and devoted follower of Moragnethe. He uses pieces of our sacrifices to fertilize the crop. The last time I visited, I was impressed with his methods. A corpse's arm, rising from the earth, supported by a stake like a tomato plant, covered with mushrooms like a second skin. Beautiful work.

A hay wagon, adorned, like the woven animals, with ribbons and flowers, waits in a place of honor in the center of the field, with a perfect view of the platform where the ceremonies will take place. Will and I are led to it by the priestesses in their rich brown dresses. I climb up onto the wagon's seat and extend a hand to Will. He gives me a wry little smile but accepts the help, taking his rightful place next to me.

Has he forgotten the needy sounds he made on my lap, the way his body begged for my touch?

Yes, and no. He has retreated to the safety of keeping me at arm's length. But there is a change in his scent when I'm near enough to catch it. And the way he looks at me has changed; in that he *looks at me.* Catches and holds my gaze. Watches me when I am otherwise engaged, speaking with someone else across the room or walking in the garden beneath his window. As if he is nourished by the very sight of me the way I am nourished by the very sight of him.

I grant myself a moment to feast before turning my attention to the opening ceremony on the stage where the priestesses burn incense and anoint themselves with fresh milk, blessing a series of babies born to their followers. Will has freckles. There are more now than when he arrived, new ones appearing as he spends time in the sun, playing with his dogs or walking the gardens, sunning himself as he fishes from the boats I had built especially for him. His pale skin glows with health and warmth, bronzed now so that it is more starkly contrasted by the pristine white of his shirt. His scent mingled with sun and breeze is the most delicious thing I've ever experienced. And now, surrounded by braided garlands of flowers that decorate the wagon and the woven canopy stretched above the seat, he's never smelled so delectable.

He seems blessed by Oldata herself. A fertile field waiting to be plowed and sown.

A possessive growl boils up in my throat, but I stifle it before it can erupt.

After the ceremony, there are several small performances and other amusements on the stage for us to enjoy as the revelry commences in earnest. Despite the Church's best efforts, once I offered my people religious freedom, it didn't take long for many of them to resurrect the Old Ways, as followers or open-minded visitors more than willing to sin now and confess later after enjoying a night of festivity. The resurgence of the Old Gods here scandalized theologians across the continent, but it came as no surprise to me. The Book came to my homeland to conquer and control, but traditions honoring the Wheel of the Year grew here as

organically as any thriving plant in its natural habitat. Think of a cottage abandoned in the forest. It will be covered with vines and pulled down, its ruins home to burrowing animals, its chimney a refuge for nesting birds.

Children arrayed in white robes wearing hay crowns studded with flowers take the stage to perform a mystery play, to dance and sing for us. When they've finished, they bring us crowns of our own. Will leans down as a little girl is lifted by her father, and lets her crown him; the vibrant blues, yellows, oranges, and purples of the blossoms are so lovely against his hair and skin. He takes the crown offered for me and places it on my head in turn with a playful smile.

I can't help myself. I catch his hand and kiss it, and the children laugh, clapping delightedly. He lets me hold his hand even after they've gone off to play. The subtle pink in his cheeks invites so many deliciously indecent thoughts into my head that I must leave him for a while to allegedly stretch my legs.

I return, however, with an unopened bottle of *løvetand* wine and two milk-glass cups I purchased from an artisan, enameled, and painted with traditional Eidermark designs – symmetrical illustrations of curved flowers and leaves, with the outline of stag in the center seemingly made of flowers. As we drink, however, his cheeks flush further, and my limits are again sorely tested.

The children return, bringing bits of dried meat for Zoe, Will's oldest dog, who has spent the day curled up at his feet instead of frolicking about the festival with Georgia. I fear she isn't long for this world, but she jumps up and eagerly devours the treats right from the children's chubby little hands. They tie ribbons around her neck and try to put a flower crown on her, which she elegantly refuses.

We eat, though only the food prepared for us by the High Priestess. After I shared Will's observations of Lord Tobias with Chiyoh, she advised an increase in security. I know there are factions in Eidermark, small but powerful, made up of bitter clergy and lesser nobility, who preferred the Triumvirate and its strong connections to the Church and dedication to lining the pockets of their selected supporters. The ones I could not catch and execute move in the shadows.

Risk has never overly concerned me before. It comes with the crown. But things have changed. Now, I have something to lose. Someone.

The light lasts long into the evening this time of year, and the sky is perfectly clear tonight, the firmament slowly darkening into violet velvet. The feast devoured, the field bears a new crop – revelers fueled by wine and mushroom tea and newly-opened kegs of beer celebrating with games and dancing, filling the night with music and joyful voices.

I secretly ask the High Priestess for some of her personal tea, and she readily supplies it. I serve it to Will, just a little, mixed with his wine, and then a little more. He opens like a flower, eyes shining, laughing easily, giving me the sweetest of smiles, and so gracious with our subjects, leaving behind any awkwardness or princely formality.

Evidenced by what he decides to do now. Fireflies dance in the dusk over the cleared field, and the children have gone to the edge of the party to chase them. Will, Georgia, and the dogs join them. I linger near a cow-shaped bale of hay, half-listening to the High Priestess as she bends my ear about matters of the kingdom and presses me for confirmation of rumors regarding Ruthenia's aggression against Traedenis. She gives up her inquiries after a time and rejoins her maidens, leaving me to watch Will play with the children.

He chases them, they chase him. They explain to him their complicated game, which is, in essence, tag. He kneels to listen intently and tries to get the rules right. Georgia sits with redheaded twins in her lap, their flame-haired older sisters braiding her long amber locks into an intricate coif decorated with flowers. Will is tackled to the ground, and these older girls gasp as if he's going to get to his feet and scold every child in sight. "You can't do that to a prince!" one of them cries, but Georgia just laughs and reassures them.

Will is laughing, too, showing his pretty teeth. The children pile onto him to hold him down. He slowly gets to his feet with a little boy dangling from each arm and roars like a bear, his fingers curled into claws. The children run away and hide under the straw animals, then gang up on him again. When a little blonde creature with big blue eyes bumps her head on a friend's elbow and cries, he stops the game and picks her up, as easily and naturally as if she was his own. "Everyone in Gaulemagne knows magic," he tells her. "If I kiss your bump, it'll feel better right away. Want to see how it works?"

She lifts her teary face from his shoulder and nods. He flutters his fingers over the top of her head and closes his eyes, murmuring nonsense words. "Are you ready?"

She nods again, a smile ghosting at the corners of her pouty mouth.

"Close your eyes, and no peeking, or it won't work."

She closes her eyes. Other children hop about delightedly, waiting for the magic to happen. My heart does the same. I believe his kiss would heal any wound ever dealt upon my body or my soul.

Will presses his lips against her forehead softly. She giggles, and he exaggerates the gesture, drawing away with a flourish. "Did it work?"

His answer is her wild laughter. She squirms out of his arms and races off to rejoin the games.

When it's dark enough to light torches, the children are called in and taken home to bed. After an extended goodbye, he returns to me where I linger with Chiyoh, the High Priestess, and several of her influential followers discussing how we might cultivate the far northern peninsula of Eidermark, a landscape of moors, the grasses there so thick the soil is difficult, if not impossible, to reach. The priestess draws the group away with a gentle reminder that it is time for the Balefire, and Chiyoh slips out of earshot, giving us a moment to ourselves. He's smiling, hair and forehead damp with sweat, breathing hard. I hand him a cup of sweet wine with another dose of tea dissolved in it. He drinks greedily to wet his throat and breathes through his open-mouthed smile, dotting his forehead with the sleeve of his shirt. We stroll the mown field aimlessly, some of Will's dogs trotting at our heels, watching as the revelers

pause their celebration to clear away the tables and pass out torches. Others bring cartloads of stones and gather the hay-sculpted animals in five different piles, ringing them with a protective band of rock.

A fair-haired man, omegan, passes us with a short bow, hampered by the toddler sleeping in his arms – the one Will soothed with his magical kiss. I watch Will watch them and I know the red in my eyes is showing. I want to haul him into my arms and lay him out on this field of abundance to cultivate fruits of his womb. And how beautiful will he be heavy with my child?

"Feeling paternal, Will?" I ask, proud of myself for the neutrality of my delivery.

He's watching the girl and her *bjørn* as they go, eyes fixed on the sleeping child's face, her flushed, cherubic cheeks and tiny rosebud mouth, the way her long eyelashes rest. "Aren't you?" is his response. When he looks at me, I can see the gold ring blown wide.

I have never actively wanted children. I've always known I would have heirs but losing Mischa has hardened that part of me. It staggers me, how much can change in a day. An hour, even, of watching him play and love and laugh, unburdened of his birthright or situation, indulging in simple joy. I want to breed him, and I will someday. The thought makes my cock stir.

"Yes," I say, unable to stop myself from resting a hand on the small of his back. I can feel the heat of his exertions through the thin fabric. Someday I will put my lips there, on the dimples at the base of his spine.

He sighs, craning that graceful neck to look up at the sky. "There's something so… *foreign* about family, beyond the-the crown, the throne. Like an ill-fitting suit of armor. Never connected to the concept."

Georgia hurries across the field, her skirts in her hand, chasing down Buster, who has an entire turkey leg in his mouth. The rest of the pack leaves us, darting after them.

"You created a family for yourself," I say, nodding to the pack as they swarm Georgia. She manages to wrestle the turkey leg out of Buster's mouth and then shakes it at them, scolding them all for bad manners.

"I created a pack of strays," he says.

"You were close to your sister."

He nods. "My brother, not so much. He was raised… away from us. Heir to the throne doesn't have much time for siblings whose only purpose is to be married off to somebody useful."

I take a chance, hoping the tea will have loosened his tongue enough to forgive my next question. "Do you think of your parents often?"

“I didn’t know my father, not really. He was never around. King of Gaulemagne, and all of that. He was a good king. I remember being, ah… little. Small enough to sit on his lap, and he held me and smiled. When I was older, I understood I was a disappointment.”

“Not an alpha.”

Will nods. “Alana and I, that’s how we…” He laces his fingers together to demonstrate. “But after Hobbs… sh-she, ah…”

“Didn’t look at you the same.”

He nods again, then kneels to pet Winston, who has trotted over as if sensing his master’s distress. I kneel as well, deferring to the dog in the hierarchy of things, king or no. I pass my hand over the creature’s soft fur, purposely touching Will’s hand in the process. He doesn’t look at me, but he smiles faintly when I close my palm over the back of his hand and hold it against the dog’s shoulder for a long moment. “I loved my mother,” Will says. “Did you know she-she nursed me herself? Didn’t use a wet nurse? Queens and Consorts don’t… *ever*... but I came out too early. So she insisted. And I lived.”

“The doctors in the maternity school of the Physicians College agree that it’s best for a child to nurse from its birth parent, benefitting both. Creates a bond.” This was the mother murdered, the bond forever severed. And the echoed murder of her killer estranged him from the only other person he might have had a bond with.

“When Alana was born, my mother was so sick after the birth she had to let someone else nurse her,” Will says as I beckon over an acolyte to refill Will’s empty glass, which I hand to him. Before giving it to Will, I tip the small vial of tea into it with a deft move of my thumb before sliding it back into my sleeve. He’s caught in the past and I need to bring him back. “Started with Matthew but he was, ah… an aggressive little monster even as an infant, I guess, and she had to hand him off…”

“You were her favorite,” I promise him. “She was the band that wove your notion of family together, and when it was undone–”

“Cut,” Will corrects me darkly.

“You know what family feels like,” I promise him, reaching down a hand to help him to his feet as Winston trots off. “We’ll adjust the suit to fit you.”

He lets me keep hold of his hand as I pass him his cup with the other. I can tell he’s considering my words as he sips. Chiyoh deflects a beta man from the Weaver’s Guild who must have something official he wishes to discuss, and I nod to her in thanks. The weaver returns to the festival where people are torn between preparing for the final ritual and the seductive quality of drink and dance, leaving us in the darker edges of the field where the fireflies roam.

“What kind of *bjørn* would you be, Will?”

He takes another sip, looking at our hands together. “Is that what you call male omega parents here? In Gaulemagne we call them *mères*.”

“It comes from an ancient word for bear,” I say, dragging the pad of my thumb over his knuckles with soft strokes. “Woe betide anyone who dares come between a male omega and his young. Especially so in your case.”

He looks away, toward the cobalt firmament where the horizon’s edge glows orange, a last gasp of sun. It upsets him, thinking about what he’s capable of, as if killing the man sent to murder you was such a sin. “I know our children would be safe with you,” I tell him, leaning closer and drawing his hand up, twining our fingers, and holding it to my chest.

“I’d be a good *mère,*” he says, looking at me again over the rim of his glass as he takes another drink. “Would you be a good father?”

“I was, to my sister, Mischa. She was not my child, but she was my charge. She taught me so much about myself.”

“What happened... during the exile? How did you escape?”

“A story for another time, it seems.” The priestesses are weaving through the field in a pentagram pattern, the piles of hay animals forming the five points of the star, with the spectators in the center, sprinkling the rock-ringed piles with herbs and flowers, others splashing them with strong-smelling oil, their chanting seeming to conjure the dying breath of the day, the last rays of light disappearing on the horizon.

The high priestess appears, a blazing torch in her hand wrapped in brown ribbons. Will quickly finishes his cup of wine and hands it off to a maiden so that we may both take it from her. He glances at me but I only smile. Following my lead, we walk in time with the chanted song, lighting each of the five sacred bonfires before pitching the torch into the last one. The hay animals blaze brightly, flames licking the night sky, cat’s tongues on black milk, the fireflies chased off, replaced by dancing sparks.

Dancing indeed. The festival goers, followers, and priestesses join hands and form rings around the fires, then switch, darting along the invisible lines of the pentagram. It takes some time for everyone to learn the steps, simple as they are, but soon revelers are spinning, hand in hand, weaving in and out of the loops, their faces joyful and fiendish in the frenzy of the flame-flickered dark.

Will wavers on his feet a little, and I can tell from his pupils he’s under the spell of the tea again, his face all wonderment. “Go,” I whisper against his ear, and he doesn’t hesitate, breaking into the line of dancers and joining hands, circling around and through, spinning, grinning at me each time he passes where I stand with Chiyoh and an exhausted, half-drunk Georgia who is trying to keep the pack of dogs together.

So beautiful. Flash of teeth, bounce of curl, the rounded apples of his cheeks in the firelight.

Mine.

The hay animals have been smoke-dried in preparation for the festival, and don't burn long. A blessing, as more and more dancers collapse in drunken exhaustion and are collected by their friends and families to be taken home. After a time, only a few remain, though the priestesses seem tireless.

Will stumbles a few times, and the next time he dances down my way I step forward to catch him, sweeping him into my arms. He's panting again, damp with his exertion, languid and easy, guileless in the wake of the wine and tea and the sacred dance. He makes a sound of protest but laughs through it.

"I could keep going," he insists, squirming in my grip.

Oh, don't do that, beloved. I tighten my arms around his backside and shoulder blades, crushing him against me, his arms bent and trapped against my chest. "I've reached my limit," I murmur into his ear and he tosses his head back, laughing.

"Your limit…?"

"Of my patience…" I am nourished by the sight of him, and I feast on the feel of him in my arms, drinking in his scent, delving my face into the crook of his neck.

He pulls away from me and I reluctantly let him go, watching him step back a pace, backlit by the dying fires. For a moment, I see him on a battlefield, surrounded by the ruins of a burned village, a lone beauty in a place razed. The image melts when he does, unable to control himself, it seems. He stumbles back into my arms, arms around my neck, and kisses me, rough and delicious. I see the cosmos in the darkness behind my eyes and his taste -- sweet wine and honeyed omega -- is delicious beyond measure. He grants my tongue entrance but gives as good as he gets.

When Chiyoh coughs, signaling the approach of someone else, I can't subdue the growl that comes up from my throat and into Will's mouth as he works his tongue against mine. "Will - er, Your Highness…?" Georgia.

Will breaks the kiss, but I don't let go of him. He glances over his shoulder at his attendant, then back at me. The dance is over, the fires burned low, signaling the end of the festival. Several priestesses and revelers watch us from a distance, whispering, smiling, some of the alphas openly licking their lips.

I release Will inch by painful inch until I am only holding his hands. Together, we leave the field with our retinue, and all night I can still taste him on my mouth.

Before we part for the night, I whisper next to his ear, "There is no omega better suited to bring Eidermark's heirs into the world. One who would kill to protect them. Vicious and beautiful."

Power is No Blessing in Itself

Chapter Summary

The court of Eidermark hosts an official engagement feast to honor Will and Hannibal's commitment to one another. Someone learns the hard way not to underestimate an omega, especially one named William Graham.

“I’m afraid I can delay it no longer.” Hannibal reached across the breakfast table and passed Will a thick envelope with a broken purple seal.

Will examined the remaining wax. The seal showed a scrollwork fleur-de-lis. “My uncle?” he asked with a grimace, and Hannibal nodded. Will opened the letter as Hannibal cut a thin slice of honeycomb and carefully transferred it to a warm piece of toast on Will’s plate.

To His Royal Majesty, King Hannibal of Eidermark, my dear future kinsman,

Jack has written and reported that his Royal Highness Prince William Graham of the house of Beauregard-Devereaux has, at last, settled into his position at court. And yet, there has not yet been a formal reception of His Highness the Prince in Eidermark. It would mean a great deal to Gaulemagne, and the prince’s family, if you were to, with all haste, publicly declare your engagement and set a date for the wedding. I have full faith in your honor as a sovereign. If you should be having second thoughts, motivated, perhaps, by the Prince’s, shall we say, difficulty adjusting to his role, please let Jack know, and he will have the matter resolved. We have received the first shipment of angel’s blood weapons and are much pleased. Gaulemagne and her brave soldiers anxiously await the remainder of the promised goods.

Yours most sincerely, with deepest affection,

Frederick, Earl of Chilton

Holy Regent of Gaulemagne

“I have to say, I was, ah, wondering when that shoe would drop,” Will said, folding the letter up and returning it. He lifted his toasted bread to his lips and took a bite, relishing the warm, oozing honey softened by the bread’s temperature.

“I’ve been approached several times by members of the council regarding an engagement party and an auspicious date for the nuptials.”

“But you’ve been putting them off,” Will said. Not a question.

Hannibal nodded.

“Because you were trying to… give time and space.”

“Yes,” the king replied, pouring Will another cup of tea.

Will’s mouth twitched up at one corner. He took another bite of toast. “But time’s up,” he said after swallowing.

“So it would seem.”

Will put his toast down, looking at the seeping amber as it bled from the comb. The shadowed parts were the color of Hannibal’s eyes when his alpha red hugged the edge of his pupil instead of invading the entire iris. “My birthday is, uhm… the first of March. I guess I thought it’d be sometime around then.”

“It’s still very cold in Eidermark at that time of year,” Hannibal told him, the looming prospect of planning a party having no effect on his appetite at all, it seemed. “I think late May would be appropriate.” He flicked his eyes up to catch Will’s as he chewed, just for a moment, Will thought, to gauge his reaction.

Will denied him this. He took a swallow of tea, not tasting it, and kept his face arranged, just as he’d been taught as a child, slipping on his princely mask.

“I have another bit of news,” Hannibal said after clearing his plate, unable, it seemed, to endure further silence between them. “All of the academies, save Caldwell’s, will admit omegan students next year, provided they show the same aptitude as their other applicants.”

Will’s brain jolted out of indignation and righteous self-pity, throwing him headfirst into dumbstruck joy. “W-what did you say?”

With a satisfied smile, Hannibal repeated himself.

Will wanted to jump over the table and leap into the king’s arms. This, he did not do, but the reaction prompted him to extend a hand that Hannibal took, giving it a loving squeeze. “Thank you,” he said, “thank you, I… I don’t know what else… I can’t believe it worked – I’ve never seen r-real progress like this…!”

“Imagine,” Hannibal purred, still holding onto his hand as he got to his feet, only to kneel at Will’s side. He pressed a kiss onto Will’s center knuckle. “Imagine the influence you will have as my husband.”

Will faltered, a hot blush rising from his collar.

“Forget why you came here. Forget how it was arranged, and the terms negotiated without your consent. Think of the future, Will.”

“A lot of important, uhm, people would come to an engagement feast, wouldn’t they?” Will looked down at his hand, which looked small and crushable when enveloped in Hannibal’s tenderly possessive grip.

Hannibal kept hold of his bent fingers with one hand, drawing them to his mouth again to kiss their flat backs again. His other palm found its way to Will’s thigh, his thumb tracing the inner seam of his breeches. Will met his eyes and saw the red ring flare from his pupil in tandem with his nostrils as he took a visible lungful of Will’s scent. “And you could have them in the palm of your hand,” Hannibal told him. “Read them, bend them to your will, and create change.”

“And you’ll help me.”

Hannibal nodded.

Will reached over to his plate and smeared honey on his first and second fingers. Touching his tongue to his lower lip in unconscious anticipation, he brought them to Hannibal’s proudly sensual mouth. The king opened immediately and let Will slip them inside. When he applied suction, Will gave an unselfconscious whine that surprised him in its naked sensuality.

“Catch more flies with honey,” he breathed as Hannibal released his fingers. “That’s why you-you served honeycomb with breakfast.”

“Finish your toast,” Hannibal said, getting to his feet, not acknowledging or hiding the outline that had sprung up in his own trousers. “We’ll have the engagement feast on the night of the new moon. That should give time to prepare, as well as falling on an auspicious night of the lunar cycle. The followers of the Old Gods saw that the moon controls the tides. We all have water inside us – are we not similarly swayed by its changing shape?”

“Nervous?” Georgia asked gently, even as her fingers were firmly businesslike as she helped him dress, sliding the cream-colored tunic over his head. Smoothing it down, she adjusted the intricate dark green and gold embroidered neckline that plunged low enough to show off Will’s neck and decolletage, just shy of obscene. *Honey,* Will thought. The sad fact of the world was that omegan beauty made people more likely to listen to you, even if they were ogling you at the same time. Attention was leverage.

Will carefully raised his hand to his face, dabbing the handkerchief against his forehead to clear it of perspiration. “How could you tell?” he asked, voice tight and more barbed than he’d planned it to sound.

“Here.” She poured him a cup of cider, the bottle kept cool in a bucket of ice chips pulled out of storage from the winter. Before giving it to him, she took it over to the glass decanters in the corner and added a healthy shot of liquor.

“You think that’s a good idea?”

“It’s a party, Will. Loosen up.”

“With the entire kingdom watching.”

“It’ll make you more charming, trust me. I’ve seen you with a few glasses of wine in your belly.”

Will sighed and took the cup, raising it to his lips. “Watch the tunic!” Georgia warned as he chugged it down and handed her the cup back.

Georgia set it aside and resumed her work, taking the folds of fine cloth and arranging them carefully against his torso, tucking them in just right before fastening his wide leather belt, her deft fingers working the intricate gold and pearl clasps. Her work ensured that the green and gold borders of the neckline, which continued down the garment to shin-length, were symmetrical, the strips of decoration widening to the hemline with increasing furls of golden-stitched vine patterns against the evergreen background.

She guided him to sit on the edge of the bed so she could help him into the sandals that matched, their straps climbing up to his knees and fastened with tassels that mirrored those on the accompanying cloak, which was dark green and covered with strips of even more elaborately embroidered gold and ivory vine decoration. “At least it’s warm enough to wear them this time,” she teased gently. “Too tight?”

“It’s fine. Don’t want them falling down, I suppose.” He shifted on the bed, upper front teeth dragging discreetly over his bottom lip as she laced him up.

“Will.”

He looked at her and took a moment to breathe. She patted his knee with a closed-lipped smile of reassurance. He nodded.

Standing, she held out a hand and pulled him to his feet as well. Georgia retrieved his diadem and placed it on his forehead, twisting his curls back and letting them spill over the band on the back and sides. “There. Now that I’ve made you gorgeous, the rest is up to you.”

He hummed with a little smile, appreciating her attempt to ease the knots in his stomach, the instinctive desire to resist pandering to society’s expectations for him as an omega, bought and sold for breeding, and his own distaste for large events and socializing. As they made their way to the door of his chambers, she half-opened it, then swatted his backside affectionately on the way out. “You’ll be perfect,” she promised. “Just *don’t* be yourself.”

This time he laughed outright, and his princely mask fell into place much more easily with a smile out of the gate.

Will had passed by the great hall many times but hadn’t had much occasion to pay it any mind. Entering it now felt like stepping into another world. The long rectangular hall was warmly lit with candles as well as the ochre rays of sun that filtered through the massive arched stained-glass windows. Will knew there were woodland murals on the walls, but these were obscured by sheer white draperies accented with cloth-of-gold and decked with garlands

of sweet-smelling white and pale purple flowers. The tables were draped in matching cloths, forming a rough U shape with a high table reserved, of course, for the couple in question. In the center of the U was a group of musicians dressed in matching fawn and burgundy jerkins, shirts, and hose. As soon as the attendants had opened the double doors, signaling Will's entrance, they struck up a rondeau version of the piece Hannibal had written to celebrate Will's arrival in Eidermark. Will strode forward, the cape trailing behind him, feeling the weight of it bearing down on his shoulders the way the gazes of the sixty-odd guests did much the same.

Everyone rose from their places at the tables, including Hannibal, who descended the two steps down from the platform to offer Will his hand. Will reached for it like a man groping through the river for his paddle before it floats away, leaving him helpless, borne along at the mercy of the current. The king's touch softened Will's world at the edges, blurring the periphery of his vision like bleeding watercolor. Hannibal was resplendent in matching evergreen and cream, though the stitching on his high-necked coat was silver instead of gold, the leaves and tendrils emanating from the row of mother-of-pearl buttons that fastened it snugly against his broad chest, tapering inward a bit along his ribs to show off his physique. Over his shoulders was an emerald half-cape trimmed with ermine fur. He wore a diadem of his own in lieu of the large ceremonial crown, silver as well, a moonstone surrounded by the customary stag's antlers resting on his noble brow.

The music melted against his ears, dancing footsteps fleeing into silence. Will could only hear his own staggered breaths and the thrum of his pounding heart. *Alpha. Alpha. Alpha.*

Hannibal kissed Will's hand delicately, then turned back to the thronging musicians and cheering nobles, showing them his outraised palm for silence. "Good people. Friends. Honored guests." At the final two words, he nodded toward a table where the headmasters of each academy sat, positioned directly to the right of the high table. "It is my pleasure to formally introduce to you Prince William Graham of the house of Beauregard-Devereaux of the Kingdom of Gaulemagne. He is far from his origins, but Eidermark is his new home, and I trust each of you to make him feel welcome. That is…" he paused and turned, taking both Will's hands now. He knelt with a soft swish of his ermine-trimmed half-cape, and looked up at Will with gleaming eyes. "If he will do me the great honor of one day becoming my wedded mate."

Will stopped breathing until black spots gathered at the corners of his eyes. The silence in the hall was a monolith threatened only by the crackling of fire and the wheezing breaths of an old duke with cloudy eyes and trembling hands.

"Will," Hannibal said softly. "I'm *asking* you."

"Yes." Will didn't grant himself the space of a second to consider, to revel in the moment of being a part of his future. His mouth said yes, but the translation was *yes*, *Alpha.*

The great hall erupted into cheering and the musicians blasted their music again, faces red and perspiring as they conjured melodies from lute, gittern, pipe and tabor, recorder, flute, and shawm. Hannibal got to his feet and made a motion with his hand. Randall approached and stood at the king's side, opening a green velvet box decorated with gold braid. Within was a necklace and a matching ring, both made of gold. The ring had been cast to look like

two stags locking antlers, which served as the tines for the setting. Nestled safely within the elegant tangle was a sizable diamond. The necklace was shaped like an angel's spread wing, each feather accented with a pearl or piece of topaz. Hannibal picked up the ring and held out his other hand. Will placed his fingers in the king's gentle grip and let him slide on the stag ring.

Hannibal requested silence from the throng again, only to say, "Before we begin, I must warn you… nothing here is vegetarian."

The hall roared with hearty laughter.

"Eat, please, and enjoy," the king said, his words giving the order for the gathered people to fall upon the tables piled with food, attendants rushing about to fill goblets and cups with wine and cider.

Will let Hannibal escort him up the two steps to the raised platform. The king eased Will's cloak from his shoulders and handed it off to a passing servant, then pulled out his chair for him before decloaking and seating himself. Randall handed Hannibal the box with the necklace, then gave a curt bow and left. His agitation snaked through Will's mind, captured by the golden pendulum, and curling in like a vine that made him uneasy all over again.

"You're blushing," Hannibal said, leaning over to speak in Will's ear.

"It's warm in here," Will shot back. "A-and I had a drink before I came."

"For your nerves?"

Will gave a small huff but nodded yes.

"You look beautiful. Just keep smiling, and they'll never know."

"Well, you'd better keep me amused, then," Will shot back with a forced grin.

Hannibal's returning smile was affectionate, his eyes glimmering with soft admiration.

Attendants came to load their plates with food and fill their cups with wine. Georgia appeared, holding a wooden case with gilt edges. She paused to curtsey, and Hannibal waved her up the stairs. "What's this?" he asked, as she opened the latch.

"My gift for you," Will said as Georgia opened the box, revealing a silver gilt wine goblet with a matching lid, covered in sea creature designs – dragons, mermaids, and tentacled monsters. "My, ah… my father's," was all he could say, watching Hannibal lift the cup carefully from the bed of velvet and place it upright on the table, the lid beside it. It'd been years since he'd seen it – Chilton had all the sentimental belongings of the murdered king and queen packed away for years. He'd sent this with Georgia for Will to give to the King of Eidermark as a personal gift. Will had refused to do so until tonight.

"I only hope that he would approve of our match," Hannibal said as a servant leaned in to fill the cup with wine. He offered it to Will first, who took a long drink.

“That’s from Gaulemagne,” he said, touching his tongue to his lips.

Hannibal nodded. “In your honor.” Soft smile, then, “Thank you, Georgia.”

“Of course, Your Majesty.” With another curtsey, she descended and resumed her place, sitting at a lower table with Randall Tier, both watching the couple carefully to see if the king or the prince required anything the servants couldn’t provide.

“In all the excitement, I haven’t shown you this,” Hannibal said after they had a few bites of tender pork served with a fruit sauce. He opened the jewelry box again and withdrew the angel’s wing pendant. Will thought it rather large, almost gaudy, until he understood why it was the size it was. Hannibal turned it over and showed him how to flip a tiny latch. The bottom of the wing slid out, becoming the handle of a small but wicked-looking dagger blade. Hannibal quickly snapped it back into place and eased the chain around Will’s neck. Will’s skin quivered where the king’s warm fingers touched. “Our secret,” Hannibal said with a mischievous glint in his eye.

The mongoose I want under the house when the snakes slither by.

Many well-wishers asked permission to approach the table and pay their respects. In between, Will ate quickly, stealing sustenance before more guests requested an audience. He did his best to be gracious, even when Caldwell mentioned the new rules of admission for the other academies with a sneer. “Seems you’ve gotten your wish, Your Highness,” he said with thinly veiled disdain, though it was paired with a graceful nod of acquiescence.

“He made a brilliant argument,” Hannibal said with an air of fond reminiscence. “The fact that he’s difficult to say no to is just icing on the cake.”

Will felt heat on his cheekbones again and clenched his jaw to keep quiet, especially when Hannibal’s hand found its way to his thigh. Will pretended not to notice even as the king’s heavy palm slid around it, fingers wrapping around the inner surface for a tantalizing moment before sliding away, the whole interaction hidden by the tablecloth. His hand dipped back down again, then circled Will’s knee.

Will suppressed a shiver, and turned his hand, looking at his ring, which felt like a miniature version of the secret caresses Hannibal was helping himself to. Something not asked for, but not *entirely* unwelcome. “I couldn’t have said no,” he murmured after the servants had come and gone, serving them warm slices of bread filled with dates, raisins, and nuts, smeared with dripping butter and a drizzle of honey.

“I thought so.” Again, that self-congratulatory little smirk, disguised as one of mild doting.

“No,” Will said with a wry laugh, wiping his buttery thumb on a napkin as Hannibal at last reclaimed his hand to eat. “I have, ah… a vivid imagination, Your Majesty. I get the feeling you do, too. Here’s an exercise. What do you think would’ve happened if… I’d said no, in-in front of all these people, after living here for months, after you’d, ah, drank some of the wine and slaughtered some of the cows, and sent a crate of weapons to my uncle?”

“The arrangements would have been dealt with.”

Will scoffed, then popped some bread in his mouth. When he finished chewing and took a drink of mead, which had replaced the wine, he said, “That could mean *anything*.”

Hannibal smiled at him over the rim of Will’s fathers cup. “I always tell you the truth, in my own way,” he said.

“Then tell me the truth.”

“I offered you the chance to rebuff me, or to at least make your refusal publicly known. That said, I didn’t think you’d refuse. For the reasons you’ve stated, and for others that I hope have awakened in your heart. Or another part of your body, at the very least.”

Will inhaled sharply as Hannibal’s hand found his leg again, slipping closer to his inseam, until his smallest finger pressed against his cock, the second testing the garment, Will thought, for any telltale dampness. “Perhaps your mind,” Hannibal suggested with that same maddening mildness, as if he wasn’t groping his fiancé under the table. “We’ve had so many *stimulating* discussions.”

Will’s breath hitched, and he just managed to snap his mouth shut when another tray of food came – a platter of what looked like venison, delicate strips of roasted meat had been sliced and beautifully layered.

Hannibal cut a piece and lifted it to Will’s mouth with his fingers. Will felt like everyone in the hall was watching as he accepted the morsel as politely as he could. Hannibal immediately cut him another piece. “The juices are where the flavor lies,” he said. Maddeningly polite, but with an undertone that Will didn’t think he’d need the golden coil in his head to perceive.

“I can cut and eat my own meat,” Will hissed under his breath as Hannibal brought the piece to his mouth.

“I have great faith in you, Will. I always have.”

Will scoffed incredulously under his breath, but with so many eyes on them, he could do nothing but accept the morsel, and Hannibal knew it. He kept his finger between Will’s lips for a long moment. Will furrowed his brow, but then sucked it clean obligingly.

The alpha’s pheromones hit him like an unexpected gust of wind, the kind that roars over a barren field. Hannibal’s hand, one finger still damp with Will’s saliva, settled on the side of his face, then carded back into his hair. Will trembled, trapping the whine in his throat where it bubbled and seethed, demanding to be released.

The desserts came and went. They were again interrupted several times by well-wishers, but managed to sample a few delights, such as bits of fried bread packed with jam and dusted with sugar. When a particularly intoxicated and obnoxious distant cousin paid a visit to the high table, Will amused himself by shifting his chair a little closer to the king, and sending his own hand on an exploratory mission, his touch maddeningly light, fingertips only, skimming from Hannibal’s knee and up his thigh while keeping his face neutral and fixed on

his in-law as if listening intently. The muscle in Hannibal's jaw twitched and Will bit back a delighted laugh.

With the meal finished, the tables were cleared and pushed further back, creating an opening in the center of the U. The musicians returned from their meal break and began to play a lively air, picking up their instruments and frolicking through the hall in a line that wove through the tables and the standing crowd. The spirit-soaked guests clapped along, rising to their feet, Hannibal and Will along with them. It seemed to be a popular drinking song, as everyone except Will, Jack, and Georgia seemed to know the lyrics. It was simple enough, however, that Will caught on quickly and sang along.

Come now all and dance with me,

And bless this merry company,

He who fails to raise his glass,

Will spend his life in woe, alas!

And though a pious man he be,

He's such boring company!

Why bend your neck, a Book to read?

When in Heaven there's no wine, beer, or mead?

One, two, three – drink it here!

In heaven there is no wine or beer!

It was a variation on a popular song Will had heard a few times in his childhood, sung by his brother and Matthew's friends, even though the Church had outlawed it for being blasphemous. And here it was being sung, rowdily, in fact, by a royal retinue, who attempted to drain their vessels at the end of each verse.

Will remembered his father liked to celebrate, to dance and have a little too much to drink to relieve the pressures of his rule. He had a memory of his father and mother dancing in the great hall of the summer palace in Gaulemagne, warmed by the sea breezes of the southern coast. He liked seeing Hannibal raise his father's cup to his lips at the end of each verse, motioning for the servants to refill his, as well as Will's, with crisp, refreshing cider.

It wasn't long before the drinking song evolved into a lively reel, and celebrants left their seats to gather on the cleared floor. Hannibal turned to Will, his eyes sparkling warm amber, like the stream of cider being poured into his cup.

“I was such an awful brat my dancing tutor quit and moved to Bittersea,” Will admitted, even as Hannibal guided him – firmly – down the stairs of the platform. A noblewoman who was well into her cups was similarly coaxing Jack closer to the throng from his guard posting. Georgia was already spinning in the arms of a strapping courtier before abandoning him and hooking arms with a buxom lass.

“Didn’t just resign the post, had to flee the country. That doesn’t surprise me in the least,” Hannibal teased.

“Your Majesty!” Baron and Baroness Komeda danced their way over, their steps fluid and sprightly, as if they were twenty years younger. “Come, come, you’re a beautiful dancer!”

The musicians threaded through the dancing crowd again. Will watched, grinning, as they snaked their way closer to where he stood with Hannibal, bowing as they played. Some crossed in front of them, while a recorder player pranced behind them, followed by the man playing the pipe and tabor, one hand holding the pipe to his mouth, the drum hanging from a strap on his wrist, which allowed him to keep the beat with the other hand. Will watched him, marveled at his ability to both drum and pipe simultaneously. The musician’s gray eyes were flinty, focused, and his dark hair was plastered to his head with sweat.

The golden strand suddenly burst from its lair in the fissure in the sunken crevices of Will’s mind. It reared, a wild wire horse, and sliced across his vision with the precision of a practiced executioner’s sword.

He saw the gray-eyed man take the pipe from his mouth and unscrew it just as he stepped behind Hannibal. Popping the instrument in half, he revealed a long, thin stiletto blade.

It was just like the night Garret Jacob Hobbs came to kill his family. Will didn’t think. The world slowed, and his perception was astonishingly clear. His heart was calm, steady, and his muscles coiled with ease, tensing just so.

Will turned and slid between the musician and the king, grabbing the assailant’s wrist, forcing the blade upward and back. With his other hand, he drew the small dagger in his necklace and plunged it into the side of the man’s neck at an upward angle. Then ripped it out, opening the wound with a twist.

Blood sprayed across his face in a warm, delicious, coppery smear, vital and brilliantly alive.

The assassin fell back, dropping his weapon and instruments, gurgling pathetically as blood poured out of the hole in his neck even as he held his hands over it in a vain attempt to keep what was flowing out within. Hannibal turned, eyes widening, and grabbed Will, hauling him back and stepping between him and the dying man, an instinctively protective act. As if Will hadn’t just saved his life.

The music stopped, and there was a momentary but momentous silence. Will clutched Hannibal’s arm, peering over his shoulder as the man died, blood bubbling out of his mouth.

As the hall erupted in screams and shouts, Hannibal’s shock evaporated in a moment. “Are you all right?” he demanded, turning to Will and grasping him desperately, feeling for

injuries, hands reddening with the blood that stained Will's face and neck.

"I'm not hurt," Will snapped, the tension forcing him to be testy. "Are you?"

"No."

The pendulum swung again as Will looked down at the dead man, who was quickly being surrounded by guards. "Lord Tobias," he said, gripping Hannibal's shoulders. "He ordered this."

"Seize Lord Tobias!" Hannibal thundered with such an uncharacteristic volume that Will winced, more frightened in that moment of his Alpha than the assassin. Never once had he heard the king raise his voice.

Tobias made it as far as the door before Jack brought him down, and he was hauled away by the guards, headed, Will thought, for the dungeon.

Georgia rushed over to Will, and Hannibal let go of him long enough for her to hug him tightly and fuss over his splattered clothes and skin. She dabbed at his face with a wet cloth, her hands shaking violently. "Was it you, or the king?" she hissed under her breath, scrubbing at his earlobe.

"Hannibal," he whispered back. He looked down at his hand, which still clutched the bloody knife.

"Leave it." Hannibal caught Georgia's wrist, his eyes flooded Alpha red. When he released her, she scurried off after giving Will another panicked glance.

Hannibal gently pried the dagger out of Will's numb fingers and lifted the necklace. Wiping the blade on his fine trousers, he slid it back into the sheath with a soft click.

"Your Majesty, we should get you to your apartments where it's safer," Randall suggested as several guards poured through the doors, ready to escort the king, and presumably Will, away.

"I don't believe that's necessary, Mr. Tier." Hannibal's words were dreamy as he took Will in his arms, cupping his bloodstained face, dragging his thumb along the sticky smear that splattered Will's cheek. His scent was overwhelming, mixing with the fresh blood, and bringing sweat and heat to every inch of Will's skin. To the guards, he said, "All of Lord Tobias's musicians must be questioned. But have them leave their instruments. Certainly, there are friends among us who can play a tune or two."

"Your Majesty…" Randall protested.

"Open four more casks of Gaulemagne wine," Hannibal ordered an ashen-faced attendant. To the stunned crowd, he announced, "Our evening has not ended, friends, despite the ill intentions of traitors."

A roar of approval echoed through the hall as if to shake the thick beams of the arched ceiling. Several courtiers picked up the instruments and gathered, briefly discussing a song,

and began to play. It was certainly not as skillful as the professional musicians' sound, but it had a beat, and each note sang in defiance of death and civil strife.

Hannibal, his eyes alight, swept a graceful bow to Will, and held out his hand. "Will you do me the honor, beloved?"

Beloved.

The word caressed Will's ears like a sultry breath. He reached out dreamily and placed his hand in Hannibal's grasp. The king drew him close, hip to hip, and spread his large hand over the small of Will's back. Will gripped his shoulder and they moved; the basic steps drilled into his head by the tutors allowing instinct to take over. The courtiers and nobles and even some of the servants joined in, pausing only to guzzle more wine or switch partners. During one brief break, when Hannibal guided wine to his lips, Georgia rushed to his side. "Are you sure you're all right?"

He nodded over the rim of his cup.

"Should I bring you something else to wear?" She glanced at Hannibal, who drained Will's father's cup and set it aside.

"I said to *leave it*." The last two words twisted in an alpha growl that sent Georgia into a deep curtsey before getting out of the way, her face still smeared with worry.

Hannibal took the cup from Will and brought him back out into the throng of dancers. Night had fallen, and the world took on a dim, fire-strewn landscape of swirling bodies, laughing faces with their lips split wide enough for Will to be able to easily imagine the skulls beneath their flesh. The makeshift musicians paused long enough to catch their breath and confer before breaking into a spirited if simple reel. Will was drawn away from Hannibal and through several lines of dancers conducting what must have been a well-known set of rustic steps, forming small circles, linking arms, switching partners. At last, they formed an enormous circle around the entire dining room, going faster and faster.

Across the circle, in the flickering candlelight from the enormous round chandeliers above as well as tiered candelabras below, Will saw Hannibal, his cheekbones sharply shadowed, looking at Will with what he could only describe as predatory love. The circle of dancers moved, and Will saw the musician he'd stabbed, his cheerful jerkin and hose spattered with torrents of gore, grinning at him, weaving in and out of the thronging dancers. The circle paused and the man on his right hooked his arm in Will's, spinning them around before joining hands in the large ring again. Another pause and a spin, and when Will glanced at his temporary dancing partner, it was Garret Jacob Hobbs who grinned at him, blue eyes clouded with rot, bearing the bloody wounds young Will had given him to protect Alana.

As they spun, Hobbs leaned in and whispered, "*See? See?*"

Will's moment of otherworldly terror melted as the dance bore him along, pantingly frantic, his sweat dripping from his curls and cutting through the blood on his face. Somehow, he was back in Hannibal's arms, clasped covetously close. Hannibal's face shone with the sweat of his exertions as well, and he was as wild and undone as Will had ever seen him, diadem and

jacket abandoned, shirt open at the neck. He held Will licentiously close, bathing him in the burning remnants of his amber perfume and the tantalizing alpha musk that poured through his pores.

The music paused so that the crowd could shout, "*Op du går!*" Hannibal wrapped his hands around Will's waist and lifted him like he weighed nothing, spinning, beaming up at him with a grin that exposed his fang-like teeth. Will had a moment of weightlessness as Hannibal dropped him. It was a purposeful part of the dance, it seemed, because he caught Will against his chest and spun again, their bodies pressed together, Will's feet skimming across the floor before being set down at last.

Will lost his balance upon contacting the floor again, but instead of flailing to try and prevent spilling himself against the marble floor, he let it happen. Because Hannibal would be there to catch him.

And he was.

The song ended with cheering and many exhausted dancers sinking into the scattered chairs or leaning on the tables, panting, and laughing, fanning themselves. Hannibal only held him, Will's head tucked on his shoulder, a hand stretched out on the lower inward curve of his spine, the other gathering and stroking the damp curls on the back of his neck. Will could feel the king's face pressed against his hair, breathing him in.

"You killed a man tonight, in this very room," he rumbled, voice laden with awe.

"When he pulled out his knife, I looked at him," Will murmured into Hannibal's shoulder, "and the space opposite me assumed the shape of a man filled with dark and swarming flies. And then I… scattered them."

"Ever since you killed the assassin that came for your family in the night, you've felt alone," Hannibal murmured, stroking his hair, slowly turning them as if the music still played. It did, in Will's heart, a lilting minor-key melody that was haunting, familiar, and deeply alien. "At a time when other men first see and fear their isolation, yours has become understandable to you. You are alone because you are unique."

"I'm as alone as you are," Will whispered back, lifting his head to look Hannibal in the face.

The king cupped his cheek, fingers roaming backward to tangle in his hair again. "You've always feared that if you followed the urges you kept down for so long, cultivated them as the inspirations they are, you'd become someone other than yourself."

"I'd become… someone other than who I've been *told* I was," Will murmured, leaning into Hannibal's touch, then dipping his face against the alpha's neck to scent him with complete abandon. If there was a crowd of people in the room, he couldn't hear them, see them, feel them. He was in a chrysalis woven by Hannibal. His alpha.

"Told to be quiet, obedient, subservient. An ornament, a womb."

Will nodded, daring to skim his lips up the king's fragrant throat.

“Killing, for an omega, is a radical act,” Hannibal told him. “Making your murders twice the crime against nature.”

Your murders.

“I had to,” he murmured as Hannibal lifted his chin to look at his face.

“I know,” Hannibal said as the musicians picked up the music again. “Of course, I know. I owe you my life.”

Will wrapped his arms around the king’s neck for a crushing embrace, both sets of hands roaming.

“*But you didn’t have to enjoy it*,” Hannibal breathed against his ear.

Before Will could protest, Hannibal kissed him, tongue diving deep, swiping across his cheek to taste the blood before penetrating again. Over the driving music, the swirling crowd broke into applause and joyful death-beating shouts.

“*Long live the king! Long live the prince! Long live the king! Long live the prince!*”

Only the Wise Profit

Chapter Summary

> Hannibal and Will welcome guests from another kingdom -- Queen Beverly and her omegan consort...

"Stop," Will breathed over his shoulder as Hannibal slid a hand down his back, fingertips dangerously close to the rounded rise of his backside. They were standing beneath a canvas awning held by soggy attendants, the cloth stretched above on poles to keep the constant drizzle at bay. Another, empty beneath, waited in anticipation of their arriving guests. The sky was gray, and despite the grim weather and the dreary, joyless damp of the courtyard, Will felt like the sun was shining on him through the warmth of Hannibal's presence, his ever-more-obvious adoration that Will finally felt comfortable accepting.

That said, it was unseemly, he supposed, to be groping one's fiancé openly as they waited for honored guests to arrive.

Hannibal ran his fingers down Will's back again, starting at the shoulder blade, his fingers stroking the dark blue velvet of his tunic. The garment had been presented to Will as a gift that morning and was embroidered along the neckline and across the back with antler designs in silver thread. "It's so soft," Hannibal whispered back as the royal carriages rolled over the bridge that brought them towards the palace, passing beneath the looming stags, their antlers free of sacrifice today.

"So's yours, and you don't see me groping you." Hannibal wore a high-necked gold and red brocade satin jacket today over a white shirt with a crimson floral pattern. It was bloody and gemlike, and Will loved it.

"I wish you would," Hannibal breathed against the back of his ear.

"Going to get yourself worked up before they even get out of the carriage? Then you'll have to sneak off for a bit, won't you?" Will teased, knowing that Hannibal must have resorted to self-abuse, especially the night of the assassination attempt, where it was a surprise the front of his breeches held together. "Such a sin."

"There is no morality, only morale."

Will stole a furtive glance over to Jack. Georgia had reported to Will that Jack had pulled her aside to talk about the physical contact between king and prince. "He wanted to know if you were still a virgin," she'd said. "I told him yes, of course, but…"

“H-he growled at me for weeks about not… playing along with this whole arrangement, and now he wants me to keep my hands to myself?”

“You don’t want people to talk,” Georgia had warned him. “If you get pregnant on your wedding night, there could be suggestions that the baby was conceived before the vows were said.” She’d smiled wickedly then. “It’s adorable, how you two have warmed up to one another, as it were. Never in my life did I think I’d be having this conversation with you.”

The carriages came to a halt, and sodden footmen hopped down to open the door of the first and grandest that Hannibal had sent to the harbor. The attendants hurried forward with the oiled canvas to protect the exiting occupants. Out came two women, one alpha, one omega, both beautiful in different ways. The first had long black hair she wore wild and free and was dressed in a subtle quilted gray tunic and thick woven belt, shining brown boots covering her knees and a silver-furred mantle over one shoulder. She extended her hand to escort her omegan consort, who was as brightly colored as Hannibal was in an orange gown that made her skin glow with shades of gold. The bell-sleeved dress rippled as she walked, its many-paneled skirt ending in a pointed hem that licked the wet stones like flames. A woman clothed in the sun on a rainy day. She wore a tiara with thin golden points that gave her a ray-like halo, while her alpha bore a ceremonial silver crown studded with opals and decorated with veins of angel’s blood. The metal must have been a gift from Eidermark. Worked into the crown, Will thought it symbolized the alliance they were set to strengthen today.

“Queen Beverly of the Lynx Clan, sovereign of Traedenis, and her royal consort, Reba of the Serpent Clan!” a footman announced as the pair neared.

Queen Beverly slapped her hand against the inside of Hannibal’s forearm and pulled him in for a half hug with a throaty, delighted laugh. “Good to see you, cousin – still dressing like a peacock, I see.”

Will winced at what seemed like a sudden familiarity, but relaxed when Hannibal smiled fondly at the queen. “I see your wife has taste, at least,” he teased, releasing Queen Beverly to take Reba’s hand to kiss. “I’m pleased to introduce Prince William Graham of the house of Beauregard-Devereaux, my intended mate.”

“So happy for the two of you,” Beverly said, giving Will’s hand a vigorous shake. Reba curtseyed, then reached out her hand. It was only then Will realized she was blind. He stepped forward and kissed her knuckles, then instinctively brought her palm to his face.

She smiled and trailed her fingers along his cheeks and jaw, over his nose and brow. “So handsome,” she said. “I’m a great admirer of your writing. Your king has sent us some of your pamphlets.”

Will blushed. Luckily, she’d taken her hand away from his cheek by then. “He has?”

“I have,” Hannibal confirmed, sliding his hand down Will’s velvet-clad back again, giving his ass a clandestine grope. “Shall we get out of the rain?”

“You call this rain?” Queen Beverly scoffed good-naturedly. “You wouldn’t survive a day in Traedenis.”

“We’d planned to take you on a pleasure boat down to one of Will’s favorite fishing spots,” Hannibal explained as they entered the palace through the unassuming front foyer, passing the Lecter family tree enameled to the wall, though it was partially obstructed by Randall Tier, who fell into step behind them with Georgia.

“We should still go,” Reba said with a grin. “I’m sure it’ll let up any minute.”

This brought a smile from Hannibal and a hearty laugh from Beverly that Will joined in. “I thought we might feed our weary travelers in a more intimate setting,” Hannibal suggested, leading them through the dining room and to the humble side kitchen where he cooked breakfast for Will every day. After stepping aside to let Beverly, Will, and Reba in, he blocked the door with his body. “Georgia, if you could bring our other guests? And Randall, if you would be so kind as to wait in the dining room, should we need anything.”

“But sire,” Randall protested, “won’t you need someone to record the details of your meeting regarding the border with Ruthenia?”

“Will has an excellent memory,” Hannibal said, closing the door on Randall’s sour face and Georgia’s eye roll in response.

The small kitchen had been outfitted with a cushioned lounge, and two more chairs at the simple table where Will and Hannibal had shared a light repast earlier that morning. Hannibal stoked the fire in the stove and brought down a cast-iron skillet, then uncovered a basket containing several small round loaves of bread. Will watched as Queen Beverly opened a collapsible cane made of angel’s blood and handed it to her mate, then escorted Reba around the room, describing it to her and showing her its dimensions through touch.

There was a knock at the door. “Will, do you mind?” Hannibal asked, washing his hands in a basin of warm soapy water.

Will went to the door, expecting to find the pinched face of Randall Tier. Instead, it was Georgia, with Winston and Buster on leads, wearing their finest leather collars tooled with stag and raven designs. Will bent down and released them, letting them trot into the room. Georgia winked at him and left.

“Oh!” Reba jumped when Buster launched himself right up next to her on the lounge, resting his paws on her lap and sniffing her all over, his little tail wagging fiercely. She broke into a wide smile, running her hands over his short, wiry coat and stroking his ears. Beverly guided her to pet Winston next, who had been bathed and brushed, his multicolored coat sleek and silky to the touch.

“Beverly tells me you’re like Will – someone who appreciates a loyal creature’s company,” Hannibal said as he carefully carved out the middle of the loaves of bread, then set a pat of butter in the pan to melt. “I thought you’d like to meet two of his pack. Your Majesty – would you care to show us your skills with a blade?” He held a kitchen knife out to Beverly, who chuckled and joined him at the stove, cutting up an onion and tomato while Hannibal cracked eggs into the hollow centers of the loaves he placed in the pan.

Will sat with Reba and told her about his dogs as they petted Winston and Buster while the alphas cooked. “Tell me about Traedenis,” Will requested. “My tutors, they never, ah… felt the need to do much more than mention it in passing.”

Beverly hmphed from her place at Hannibal’s side. “Sounds like Gaulemagne.”

“You’re not wrong,” Will said. Gaulish culture in general seemed to think that everything worth knowing in the world came from their country or was somehow connected to its history. “Hannibal… erm, His Majesty – told me about the longstanding alliance between Traedenis and Eidermark – how your kingdom protects the natural harbors so Ruthenia can’t build a navy.”

“And in return, Eidermark is gracious enough to supply us with angel’s blood weapons and armor, as well as grain and livestock,” Reba said, running Winston’s ears between her fingers. “Our land is rocky – the soil is difficult to cultivate, so our long friendship with your kingdom here is vital to the wellbeing of our people.”

“Is it true,” Will asked hesitantly, worried somehow that what he’d read about Traedenis was only a legend, “that omegas have the same legal rights as alphas and betas?”

Reba smiled, reaching out to touch his face, reading his expression. “It is true,” she said. “Though not widely known, but yes. We’re a small kingdom. We need our citizens to love their queen and defend our little strip of coast with their lives, and any able-bodied Tradenian is an asset. Which reminds me, I’ve brought you something.” Reba reached into a small silk bag that hung at her waist. Will hadn’t noticed it until now, as it blended in perfectly with her gown. From it, she withdrew a leatherbound book and handed it to him. “I’m compiling a history of notable omegans in the history of Traedenis, and I’d like to include stories of our allies as well. This is just a rough draft, dictated of course – but I’d love to hear your thoughts.”

Will took the book and opened it eagerly, eyes flying over the pages. “I can’t wait to read it,” he said, turning page after page. “Thank you.”

“God willing, omegas in Eidermark will one day have the freedoms and protections of our citizens,” Beverly said, sprinkling chopped onions and tomatoes into the egg-filled holes in the bread.

The meal, of course, was delicious, and the company wonderful. Will was warmed by the obvious affection – no, the deep and abiding love – that he sensed between Reba and Queen Beverly. It spoke to him, not only through the seamless way Beverly assisted Reba, but how it was only when needed. A kind of natural dance, as if they were two halves of the same whole. Where Reba couldn’t see, Beverly often couldn’t hear. Not in a physical sense: she wasn’t impaired, but the fiery queen often seemed to wait for her turn to speak instead of fully *listening*. And in those cases, Reba would touch her arm, a signal to slow down and be present.

Will could smell it – the way their two scents, alpha and omega, mingled and wove in with the comforting smells of a cook fire and hearty food. All this, and the way they smiled at one another made the golden strand in his mind caress his consciousness.

I want that, his mind whispered. *That sweet and easy peace.*

Reba was feeding scraps to Buster when Beverly changed the subject from lighter topics. "Thank you for arranging this," she said, motioning to the intimate setting. "What I came here to tell you needs to be kept between the four of us. No secretaries or councilors."

Reba patted Buster's head, then found Beverly's hand and held it. Will instinctively mirrored the action, laying his hand over Hannibal's where it rested on the table. He sensed, rather than saw, the surge of affectionate pride the unbidden gesture brought out in the king.

"As I've said in my letters," Beverly began, "the border's been suspiciously quiet. You know Tsar Abel Gideonovich – he just loves to pile soldiers up at the edge of the Vlaga River like they're seconds away from invasion."

Which would be a mistake, Will knew. The length of Traedenis' border with Ruthenia was protected by a deep, wide river that ran at the base of steep cliffs, in which Tradenisian troops had established countless guard posts and archers' nests atop the rises and within the cliffs themselves, utilizing a cave system. Part of the reason the kingdom struggled agriculturally was that they couldn't farm the fertile riverbanks without being menaced from the other side.

"My scouts report that while there are still a few cursory patrols, the men stationed there are either grizzled and gray or so young they look like they ought to be clinging to their mother's aprons. The commanders are prime enough, but we've never seen such a reduced force, and so many who aren't truly fit for combat."

"A plague?" Hannibal suggested. "Or Yamato attacking from their eastern border?"

That would make sense, Will thought. According to what he'd read, and Hannibal had described, Yamato tried every few decades to recapture a peninsula they'd once held, and the waters around it.

"We thought the same," Reba said. "But our spies have found nothing of the kind."

"But they did find something else," Beverly said. She took a sip of tea before continuing, leaving Will on tenterhooks. "The Tsar held a convocation at their northwestern border. Apparently, the rumors about a nomad uniting many of the tribes of the Wastes and declaring himself king are true. A warlord amassing power, killing opposing leadership and absorbing the warriors left behind."

"He's calling himself the Great Red Dragon," Reba supplied, and while her gaze was blankly fixed on a spot on the table that she couldn't see, Will noticed the fear in her eyes. "He's purposely creating a legend around himself, but some of the stories are true. He's a monster."

"Did the Tsar pull his troops from-from Traedenis to… prevent an *invasion*?" Will wanted to know. His mind immediately conjured an image of a map, and the thin strip of ocean that separated Eidermark from the southern tip of the wasteland.

"No," Reba said. "The convocation was a grand affair, with feasting and games, gifts… It was the celebration of an *alliance*."

Will immediately glanced at Hannibal to gauge his reaction. While his face remained neutral and mildly curious, the king turned his palm and caught Will's, his thumb tracing Will's skin in a constant circle mirroring the churning that must be going on in his mind as he absorbed the information. "Perhaps Tsar Abel wants to appease this Dragon to keep the peace at his northwestern border."

"It's possible," Beverly said. "We have no real way of knowing. But any time our enemies get in bed together, it can't be good for us."

"I'll increase the production of weapons and armor," Hannibal promised. "Divert resources there. Keep your forces alert at the river."

"You're right," Beverly agreed. "It could all be a ruse to get us to lower our guard."

"If Ruthenian forces are allowed up into the Wastes, couldn't they find a harbor and gain access to the Austmarian Sea?" Will asked hurriedly, his breakfast now heavy in his stomach.

"Unlikely," Hannibal assured him. "In the winter, much of their coastline is locked in ice, and there are no trees for lumber. Still, I would increase ship patrols of the coastline where you can, and I'll send some of mine up the curve from the west."

"Pray for peace, prepare for war," Reba said with a sad smile in Will's direction.

After another hour or so of discussion, Reba stood up to stretch. Both dogs got up with hopeful wags of their tails. "They need to go out," Will said when Hannibal glanced at him.

"Why don't you take them for a walk?" the king suggested.

"Getting the omegas out of the room?" Will asked, realizing as the words left his mouth that he was only half-joking. "Wouldn't want to worry our pretty little heads with all this strategy?"

"I think they've worried us quite enough," Reba said gently. "If there's anything of note you can trust they'll tell us later."

Trust. Reba trusted her mate implicitly – that was the basis of their connection.

Do I truly trust Hannibal? he wondered, feeling a sinking pinch at the base of his heart.

He wanted to.

"Come." Reba picked up her cane and ran it along the wall, finding her way to the door. Will attached the leads to the dogs' collars and followed her, leaving the king and queen to strategize further.

Randall stood rigidly just outside the small hall that opened into the grand dining room. His body gave a jolt of excitement that evaporated as soon as he saw it was Will and Reba. "Does the king need my assistance?" he asked hopefully.

“Not at the moment,” Will said, a curt curl to his words he did his best to dampen. Reba took his arm, and they left the dining room, winding through the halls to the garden doors. These led to to a cobblestone courtyard lined with flower beds, and a path that would take one out into the garden and down to the waterfront. There was a little nook to the side where the courtyard wall met the side of the palace with a wooden roof and a bench seat beneath. Just a few steps through the rain and they were protected again.

Will unclipped the dogs’ leads and let them trot off through the wet grass. “They’re going to need a bath after this,” Will said through a half smile. “Buster, ah… always manages to find the mud.”

“Sounds like my youngest,” Reba said with a fond smile. “Tara. I’m sure she’s giving her nanny a run for his money while Mama and Omaa are away.”

“How many children?”

“Six,” Reba said through a disbelieving smile. “Beverly’s Omaa lives with us, thank the Gods. She raised six herself, so she knows a thing or two.” She lifted a golden chain from the bag at her waist. A disc the size of Will’s palm hung from it, decorated with colored glass in geometric patterns. She flipped a clasp and showed him how it unfolded, revealing six small portraits painted in painstaking detail. Two boys and four girls with varying shades of skin. The boys, alphas, Will guessed, had Beverly’s eyes, as did the youngest, the hell-raising Tara.

“Reba,” Will began, running his finger over a bit of embroidery on the edge of his tunic, “I want to… uhm, ask you something.”

“Of course.”

“Omegas in your kingdom have the same rights, and have for…”

“A century at least,” she supplied. After a loaded silence, she reached out for Will’s face and felt gently along his mouth and brow. “That’s what you want for Eidermark.”

“For everywhere,” Will said. He sighed. “Did you… were you…”

“Was my marriage to Beverly arranged?”

“Yes,” Will said in a grateful exhale. “That’s… what I’m trying to ask you.”

“Yes and no,” Reba revealed. “While omegan citizens have full rights and protections under our laws, the rules of succession haven’t changed. Everyone knows that other countries wouldn’t recognize our sovereignty if we were ruled by anyone other than an alpha. So, when Beverly was set to inherit the throne, she needed to select an omega from a noble family. There were a handful of us that would be considered eligible. She chose me but made it very clear that if I didn’t want to become the Consort, I didn’t have to. There were others that would be happy to take my place.” She smiled. “But I wanted to be with her. It made my family more than happy, and I knew I could grow to love her. I knew it within the first few encounters.”

“Did it feel… instinctive?” Will wanted to know. “I mean, was it… her alphahood, her interest in you…?”

“Everyone, omega or otherwise, enjoys being so forcefully desired. I always worried that any potential mate would see me as… a burden. Or pity me. Or pretend to. If there’s anything I hate worse than pity, it’s fake pity. Bev never saw me like that, not for a minute. I won’t pretend that instinct had no part in it. You know as well as I do that our natures encouraged us to gravitate together. But when I realized that she could both acknowledge my blindness without making it my entire identity, that’s when I knew. I knew I could love her and bear her heirs and find happiness in my… shall we say, traditional role as the Consort.”

As she spoke, the rain stopped. A brisk breeze blew in, and while it cooled the damp air, giving Will a shiver or two, it chased away the gloom. The dogs, having exhausted themselves bothering the cooks in the kitchen garden on the other side of the wall, came trotting back around and settled at their feet, the breeze ruffling their damp coats dry.

“Do you trust her?”

“With my life, and the lives of our children,” Reba answered instantly, without room for a breath. Now came the pause, as she reached out to touch his face again as he fiddled with the embroidery of his tunic. “You’re not sure about the king,” she suggested softly with a tender brush of his mouth with her fingertips.

“I want to trust him,” Will said. “I… I didn’t have a choice to come here. And I resented him for it, resented everyone. Then he… proved himself…” Will gave himself a moment to gather the threads. “I was invited into that kitchen the same as you were. To hear your queen’s report… information nobody else knows. He’s been releasing my writings to people with influence in Eidermark, and he… seems like he respects me. He asks for my council. And… like you said… he *wants* me. But I can’t help wondering if that part of it is… ah, *clouding* my judgment of him.”

“What would he gain? The contracts have been signed. The marriage will happen. He has the right to take whatever he wants. If he didn’t want you to be happy, to return his affections, then why go through all the trouble only to pull the rug out from under you after the wedding?”

“I don’t know.” Will leaned forward and rubbed his face. Winston whined and got to his feet to lick Will’s hand. Will stroked his head and leaned back with a sigh. “I can’t let it go. That he’s… hiding something from me, but he wants me to be… too distracted to notice.”

“What might he be hiding?”

“That’s the thing – I have no idea. But I know there are some nights he’s not here, not in his chambers, and I don’t know where he goes. One night I pushed the issue, demanded to see him, and his secretary,” Will spat the word, “went to Jack and told him I was hysterical, and he ought to force me to see the physician. By the time it all played out, it was, ah, it was late at night. Jack all but *dragged* me to my bed and told me to get some sleep. And then, Hannibal was there. He had his nightclothes on, but… I don’t think he’d been asleep. H-he smelled like… food. Like cooking meat and smoke.”

“That is curious.” Reba’s brow furrowed as she leaned forward to pet Buster, who had his paws up on the bench.

“And then there was the shirt,” Will groaned. “I went into my fall heat a couple of weeks ago. And he put one of his shirts in the heat room, which only made it worse. He said he thought it would comfort me, but he’s a brilliant man. He had to know that it’d make my… *need* all that much more painful.”

“He wanted his scent with you,” Reba said, letting Buster lick her hand.

“I felt like he was *training* me.” Will’s words were bitter.

“Alphas,” Reba sighed, getting to her feet. “What are we going to do with them? They can be the most learned creatures on the continent and sometimes they still think with their cocks, don’t they?”

Will laughed, and it eased a knot that had hardened in him, loosening the loops, though it did not come undone. “He went into rut,” he revealed. “Just because I was in heat. There were four closed doors between him and me and somehow he still caught my scent.”

“Are you sure you didn’t plan for that as well?” Reba teased him.

“He had to be *restrained,”* Will told her in a low, confidential tone, the thought of it bringing a flush to his face and along his collarbone. “They chained him up in his bedchamber. Jack had to bloody his nose to stun him long enough to get the manacles on.”

Reba grinned, feeling his face to sense his smile. “I think the two of you are going to have quite the wedding night!”

The Great Ones Eat

Chapter Summary

Will discovers the mysteries of Corpse Angel.

Will threw the rubber ball across the front courtyard of Castle Lecter, watching his pack go chasing after it. Georgia threw another, and half the dogs veered off to chase that one instead. After a tussle, Max and Winston returned with the toys to be thrown again. It had been a sunny day, but chilly – autumn was here, and the leaves had exploded in color, raining piles of red and gold onto the lawns and gardens. They blew around the courtyard, chasing after the dogs in little swirls of light and air and color.

"He said he'd be back before sundown," Will said, eyeing the horizon. With every passing minute, darkness crept in, leeching the remaining warmth from the air.

"Why don't we go have supper and look for him after?" Georgia suggested, pulling her cloak more closely around herself. Even the dogs seemed ready to go inside, with only Buster and Max chasing the next ball thrown.

"Because I heard Randall say something to Baroness Komeda about tonight," Will reported. "Today when we visited the academy. I just… I feel like it's going to happen again."

"What is it exactly that you think he's doing?" Georgia wanted to know, tucking the rubber balls into a pouch on her belt. "Stealing off to a brothel or something? I guess he might want to relieve the pressure, if you know what I mean. Being around you all the time, not able to–"

"Georgia," Will stopped her with a curt recitation of his name. "I don't think he's going to a brothel." He paused, dragging his teeth over his lower lip. "Do you think he is?" A stiletto blade of jealousy, shaped very much like the one that nearly assassinated the king, stung into his heart.

"And risk a bunch of royal bastards running around? I doubt it."

He gave her a furious frown.

"I'm sorry!" she cried. Then, softer, hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry. No, I honestly don't think he would. Because it's clear to me and everyone else how he feels about you. And he just doesn't seem the type. The fact that I'm saying that about an alpha is reason enough to trust him."

Will nodded, not meeting her eyes, moving a little pebble from side to side on the cobblestones below with his toe.

"Have you ever just asked him?" They were walking now, strolling down the crushed gravel lane to the bridge, Will half-consciously wandering closer to where he was sure Hannibal would appear at any moment.

"No," Will admitted. As they neared the bridge and its stag's head embellishments, he looked up to see what was left of the body of the most recently executed traitor. Nothing but a few scraps of cloth snagged on the metal tines. The crows perched on the barren metal, and Will fancied they were as forlorn as he was, waiting for Hannibal's return. For sustenance.

"Then why don't you? He's shared so much with you, Will. You're privy to secret meetings with the kings of allied countries for Lumeria's sake!"

"Because he's working very hard to blind me to… whatever this is." Will paused his confession to look at the sky's deepening dark, bruise-purple clouds gathering in the west, threatening to snuff the sun a few minutes earlier than the horizon would. They left the gravel path and stepped onto the bridge, stopping at its apex and looking out over the channel at the last rays of sun glistening on its cold surface. The dogs spread out along the bank, or headed back towards the kennels in search of their dinner. Winston alone joined them on the bridge, plopping himself down protectively at Will's feet. Will wondered if his animals could smell the death that clung to the impaling tines of the antlers that arched above.

Just then, the jangle of harnesses alerted them. Will's head whipped to the side to see the royal carriage and its accompanying guards leaving the city street and turning up the lane that would bring them to the bridge. A swath of soft relief swaddled Will's heart, and he waved at the party like an excited child.

Georgia greeted some of the guards as the rode by, half-bent to keep her hand on Winston's collar, should he dart out in front of a horse. The dog looked at her as if to say, *you know I know better than that!* The company came to a halt as the royal carriage passed the apex of the bridge. The door of the sturdily built conveyance opened, gold edged and elegant but with only a small window, designed for protection more than splendor.

Hannibal had his hand on the latch, leaning out towards Will with a little smile. "Going my way?"

Will felt his face split into a grin, and he clambered inside with ungraceful haste. "My apologies. Excuse us, please," Hannibal said to Georgia as he shut the door, leaving her to walk back with Winston.

"I suppose you're not late," Will said wryly in the privacy of the conveyance, which rolled with uncharacteristic slowness toward the palace, gesturing at the last scraps of light that stretched thinly up from the sunken horizon.

Hannibal's response was to lean across the carriage and grab Will roughly by the arm, hauling him into his lap. Will yelped, though the sound came from surprise, not distress. The

alpha crushed him into an embrace, and Will submitted instinctively, knees on either side of Hannibal's hips, arms around his neck.

The king's hands roamed Will's back, then slipping down to his ass and thighs, caressing and squeezing as Will stroked and pulled his hair after tossing his diadem aside onto the cushioned seat.

"You were waiting for me," Hannibal murmured against Will's throat, where he nuzzled against the rise of Will's mating gland, tempting himself, perhaps, testing his restraint. He lifted one of Will's hands to his face, pressing it against his cheek, then kissing it. "Hands are cold. You waited awhile."

"Felt like ages," Will admitted, his breath staggering in his throat as Hannibal breathed on his cold hand, then slipped his hot tongue between Will's first two fingers, then the next two.

"You were waiting for me." Hannibal repeated it, as if it were a revelation, dragging his lips over the gland again, then up beneath Will's jaw, teasing its bony ridge with his teeth.

"Yes."

Hannibal's plush lips left his jaw and he snarled his fingers in Will's hair to kiss him. Will could feel the press of his hardness through two pairs of breeches and allowed himself a little smirk against Hannibal's lips. He'd learned that while the king was a cultured, refined man in many ways, like many alphas, he had no qualms about walking through the palace with a noticeable bulge that everyone else was supposed to politely ignore. When he dragged his palm down Hannibal's cheek, feeling the sharp cut of bone, and then drifted it down the side of his neck, the king said, "Warm now."

"You, ah… you tend to have that e-effect on me," Will stammered through hitched breaths. If only this short carriage ride up the lane to the palace would last forever…

"You missed me." It seemed like Hannibal spoke a revelation with a true weight that only he understood.

Will nodded, though a quiver of the golden strand in his mind whispered to him. He'd been anxiously waiting to catch Hannibal to learn where he snuck off to. Hannibal thought he'd been braving the autumn chill because he was so affected by his absence. Not that Will wasn't – he did miss his fiance when he wasn't around. But the power his favor had over the king, he realized, was *palpable*. He did want Will's approval, wanted his regard, not just to make life at the palace easier, to encourage the entire process of producing heirs to be more genial.

No. This was the truth: he *craved* Will.

In part of a second, he was drunk on the feeling of being so intensely desired. Dizzy with his own power over an alpha. A king.

The carriage ground to a halt and Will groaned as Hannibal, ruffled for once, it seemed, gave a little huff of disappointment. The king caught his jaw and gave him one last lingering kiss before plopping him down on the seat next to him. Will hissed as the diadem's pointed edge poked up into his backside, then withdrew it from under himself, laughing. He smoothed Hannibal's hair as best he could and replaced it, just in time for Randall Tier to open the carriage door on Hannibal's side. "Your Majesty, everything for tonight is in readi–" The secretary cut himself off, his eyes falling on Will and hardening, an instant glacial freeze that made Will want to answer with fire, possessiveness blazing through his veins. He thought about snapping the young man's neck. The feeling was so strong he almost didn't catch Randall's slip up.

He took a breath as Hannibal smoothed Will's curls for him in turn. "What's happening tonight?" he asked innocently.

"Oh, I meant–"

Hannibal silenced Randall with a wave of his hand. "I have a surprise for you, Will," he said with a doting smile. "I hope you haven't eaten supper already."

Will shook his head.

"Come." Hannibal exited the conveyance and held out a hand to help Will. Randall glowered as they walked arm and arm into the long front hall. Every time they passed the family tree with its blank space next to Hannibal's name, where one day Will's name would be painted, Will felt a kind of otherworldliness, as if it was both fated to happen and could never occur.

Hannibal escorted Will to his chambers. "You'll want to dress very simply, which I know you'd prefer in any case. Something you'd wear fishing, perhaps. I'll return to fetch you."

"Where are we going?" Will wanted to know as Georgia opened the door with a little curtsey to the king.

"You'll see." Hannibal leaned in and kissed his forehead, then retreated down the hall.

Georgia reached out and grabbed his sleeve, pulling him in. "What's going on?"

"I don't know," Will said. "But it doesn't sound like he's trying to, ah… give me the slip, not tonight."

Will quickly changed clothes and waited impatiently for Hannibal to return. The king eventually did, wearing simple clothes of his own, black breeches, boots, and a gray shirt with an unadorned jacket. Will was dressed similarly, though in shades of brown. "I'm unsure how long we'll be," Hannibal told Georgia. "I'll be cooking for Will myself."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Georgia said, giving Will a sneaky wink. "I can scare up my own supper."

Hannibal took him down a back staircase, and through a deserted servants' hall. They descended another narrow staircase into a storage room filled with barrels of preserved fish and other foodstuffs. Here, Hannibal helped himself to a torch, lighting it from a burning lantern. There was a small opening in the wall, and Hannibal squeezed through, guiding Will along with him. The subterranean space was lined with stone, and the air was moist, chilly. This tunnel wound around for some time. Will followed in tense silence, his eyes desperate to find something that wasn't Hannibal's back, the torch, or stone walls.

At last, they came to a gate, and Hannibal called for Chiyoh. She appeared, unlocking it to grant them access. Now they were in a a wide underground room, enclosed by rough-hewn rock on all sides with a smooth, slabbed floor. It had a small graceful arch on one side, and another gate to their left.

Oddly enough, there was a table here, set up a few feet from the gate with a Yamatoan-style tea service spread out. Chiyoh latched her keys to the belt of her uniform and poured two small cups of tea. Hannibal led Will over to the drinks and handed him the delicate red porcelain cup, sleek and handleless. Taking the other for himself, the king tapped their glasses together and drank swiftly.

Will's brow furrowed, and he took a sip. While the tea wasn't altogether terrible, there was an acrid taste to it that explained why Hannibal had bolted his. "What is this?" he asked.

"Drink it quickly."

"But what is it?"

"An herbal remedy. More medicinal than meant to be enjoyed. Drink." He guided the cup to Will's lips, and he had no choice but to drink. Chiyoh poured him another, though Hannibal didn't have another. "Aren't you–"

"Trust me, Will."

Will thought back to his conversation with Reba. And he drained the cup a second time.

Now they turned toward the second gate in the room. Chiyoh opened it and stood aside to let them into the dank hallway, grabbing a torch to bring with them. Will could feel the misery dripping from the walls the same way he could sense the moisture trickling between the slimy stones. The dungeon. They were headed for the dungeon of all places. Will opened his mouth to ask a question, but Hannibal's words soaked through his mind, water through the cracks.

Trust me, Will.

The barred holding cells were mostly empty, but Will passed one or two that he swore were occupied, the prisoners inside huddled in the corners with ragged blankets over their heads as if it could serve as camouflage. Will smelled human filth, and the mingled scents of beta and alpha in distress. As they passed one cell, a pair of bright red-ringed eyes shot up

from the folds of filthy cloth. He heard an alpha's desperate, starved growl, feral with sudden and vicious desire. Will's instincts flooded him with a sharp panic, screaming at him to run.

Hannibal growled in response, a rich alpha rumble, slipping his arm around Will's shoulders and shifting him to the other side of the hallway, positioning himself between for the momentary passing. The prisoner kept himself in check, crouched in the corner, though he watched them intently with his flaming eyes until they were out of sight. Will nuzzled against Hannibal's shoulder until his heart slowed. He felt strange in the wake of his fright, the world taking on a shadowy, nightmare quality that made the darkness breathe and dance. He rubbed his eyes as if it'd help him see more clearly, but it didn't help.

They stopped at the last cell on the left, Hannibal's arm still draped around Will's waist. Will peered through the dim, looking for the person within. Chains clanked as Lord Tobias rose unsteadily to his feet, his finery from the engagement feast clinging to his body in tatters. His eyes widened, then narrowed as he took in the sight of Will. "Come to see your king's true face?" he sneered. "For all his grace and civility, his musicianship and artistry, his alleged commitment to moving Eidermark into a new age, away from the darkness – look at me, princeling. See how he keeps his prisoners. See how he executes his alleged traitors, without any kind of trial, any chance of mercy!"

Chiyoh drew a parchment from her pocket with one hand, and unrolled it, holding the torch higher to read it. "Lord Tobias, Earl of Budge, for the crime of treason, by which you ordered the assassination of your sovereign, you are hereby sentenced to death."

"With what evidence?" Tobias thundered, lurching toward the bars of the cell, wrapping his hands around them and spitting his words with terror and fury. "Just because a musician from my academy was a radical doesn't mean I had anything to do with it!"

"Chiyoh's investigation was thorough, and we have letters and statements in our possession," Hannibal said, voice cool and commanding. "You've been making instrument strings for years from gut, of course, but you've also been secretly manufacturing bow strings and smuggling them across the sea to Ruthenia. Anyone who discovered your plans was killed, and made into strings as well, weren't they, Lord Tobias? Your strings always had the best sound – my harpsichord will miss them."

Will heard an eerie music coming from the shadows themselves, the mellow vibrato of a cello playing a strange, tuneless song in minor key. He glanced around, but could not locate the source of the noise. It seemed to emanate from Lord Tobias himself as the golden pendulum in Will's head wormed its way into a different part of his mind.

"But strings weren't enough. Now Tsar Abel wanted your help with another matter – my death," Hannibal said, his hand teasing up Will's back and tracing through the curls at the base of his neck. The touch felt amplified a thousandfold – what was happening to him? He unconsciously drooped his eyes shut for a moment, savoring the feeling. "He threatened to expose your treason if you didn't assist. Then it was only the matter of finding a musician mad enough to twist to your will, to convince he was going to be a martyr for a greater cause. That his compositions would live forever, perhaps, if he was put to death for killing me, that you'd write him a proper requiem."

“But that’s not what happened,” Will murmured, unaware that he’d spoken until he felt his lips move.

“No. It isn’t.” Hannibal stroked his hair, then kissed his hand. To Lord Tobias, “Are you still hearing my beloved’s serenade behind your eyes? Knowing that he brought you to this moment?”

Tobias’s look was pure murder. But he relaxed his shoulders, throwing them back, and raised his chin, hands resting at his sides. “In my planning,” he admitted, voice formally glacial, “you are correct. I did not account for the prince.” He narrowed his eyes at Will. “You’re an abomination. You were *made,* by God or Nature, to bear offspring, to nurture them. But you are a *savage*, princeling. I can only imagine the twisted little monsters the two of you will create. I hope they devour you both.”

“Nothing would make me more proud,” Hannibal said. He nodded to Chiyoh, who pocketed the scroll again and unlocked the cell. A troop of her guards came from the gate on the far end of the prison hallway and entered, with every intention, Will sensed, of hauling Tobias out kicking and screaming.

“I’d like to come of my own volition, if it’s permitted,” Lord Tobias said, voice tight, bobbing as he tried to swallow.

Hannibal nodded, and the guards escorted the condemned man out of the cell and through the gate on the far side. As they walked, they left a trail of undulating color behind them. Will clutched Hannibal’s hand, watching them go. He felt a little like the night he’d danced at the hay-mowing festival, but in this context, the world was twisted and eerie. He wasn’t entirely sure if he was awake or asleep, if his eyes were open or not. “What’s happening?” he murmured, instinctively leaning into his alpha.

“Lord Tobias is going to pay for his crimes tonight,” Hannibal said, stroking Will’s face with the back of one finger. “And I want you there.”

Will nodded vaguely, and let himself be led through the gate. The passage ceased, opening up into a natural cavern lit by torches and braziers. Will looked up at the stalactites plunging down from the ceiling and had the panicked sensation of walking into the open maw of a leviathan.

Will mind melted into the flickering shadows, feeling the cool damp of the cavern like a sepulchral caress. The king held his hand, elevating it so Will’s own was folded over his, a formal posture of ceremonial escort. Hannibal led him along the passage to a small alcove, where Randall emerged. The king’s loyal secretary wore a floor-skimming black robe and a dour expression. He bowed, regardless, and handed Will a folded black cloth that turned out to be a matching robe.

Will shook his head, an unspoken question on his lips, but he let Hannibal help him into the flowing garment. The king draped it over his shoulders, pausing to run his fingertips along Will’s cheek, then through his hair before easing the hood up over his head.

“One moment,” Hannibal said, leaving Will with Chiyoh as Randall accompanied him back into the alcove. Will couldn’t stop looking at his guardian, fixated on the way the torchlight cut shadows in the hollows of her cheeks and made her black eyes glimmer. Chiyoh was simultaneously slender and birdlike and towering with some primordial power, a monolith of flesh and bone, terrible and beautiful.

“How well do you know Hannibal?”

Will felt like if he looked hard enough at the darkness between them, he could see her voice rippling through it, the aftereffects of a pebble piercing a pond’s glassy surface. What was happening to him? That question drowned out his other, which was why she’d used the king’s first name instead of his title.

“One could argue… intimately,” Will said, watching his voice ripple out of his mouth, disturbing the torch-flicker shadows. It had to be a dream, but it also couldn’t be.

“We have a word in Yamato. *Nakama*. It is someone close, someone you share with. Nothing that can be traded for with goods or livestock.”

Will felt like his skin had become translucent, that she could see every vein in his body and every thud of his heart. The golden strand in his mind became a vine that burst into flowers, unfurling its leaves. It was a force of nature and completely outside the modicum of control he’d learned to wield over it. “Yes, we are *nakama*. I-I’m bound to wed and make heirs, but… I chose to… love him.”

“Why?” Louder. Now the ripples hit the walls of the cave, creating echoes.

“Because I’ve never known myself as well as I know myself when I’m with him,” Will said.

“Remember that tonight,” she said.

“Why?” he wondered, reflexive and childlike.

Just then, Randall re-emerged from the alcove, lowering and adjusting a stag’s skull mask over his face. And behind him came a creature that plunged Will’s already fragile world into nighttime waters, the shadows liquid.

Hannibal.

The king had become a creature draped in black, as Randall was, but his mask wasn’t made of an antlered skull. It had been intricately carved from wood and stained pitch black, with milky glass orbs embedded where the eyes should be, the sockets lined with tooled silver and diamonds that glittered icily even in the warm firelight. The ebony face replicated Hannibal’s features, capturing his cheekbones and eye shape, his proud mouth, frozen in black. The mask curved backward over the top of Hannibal’s head to support a pair of obsidian stag’s antlers that spread wide, gleaming and dangerous.

As Hannibal moved closer to him, gliding over the floor of the cavern as if he were floating an inch off the ground, Will's eyes showed him something impossible – tiny corpses impaled on the antlers' tines, rotting and mutilated. Crows no bigger than moths alighted on the spoiling meat and pecked it from the bone, delighting in the rancid feast.

Will raised his hands to his face and rubbed it vigorously, then slowly slid his fingers down his face, overcome by the sensation of his own touch. When he looked again, the traitors' bodies and the crows were gone, but the black stag-man version of Hannibal remained. Will knew it was him. He'd know his alpha's scent anywhere.

"Hannibal," he murmured, catching sight of the king's true eyes through small openings between the orbs of milky glass and the silver-set diamonds. They glimmered with adoration. Will reached for him, running his fingertips over the smooth, polished features, marveling as the immobile mask, impossibly enough, smiled lovingly at him.

There were questions. There should be questions. What was happening? What was going to be done to Lord Tobias? Why was Hannibal dressed like this? What had been in the tea he'd given Will? The queries touched the back of his tongue before receding down his throat, shying away, animals shrinking into the safety of their shared burrow as a predatory shadow blocked out the sun.

When the Stag King offered his hand, Will accepted it without hesitation.

This moment has brought us to the threshold of Love and Death, the hinges upon which all human sympathies turn, the axis that spins the world. Will has my heart in his teeth. It is all up to him now whether he will kiss it, caress it with his tongue, or bite down, rending it in two. Will he bite to destroy, or consume? Does he want me inside of him, nourishing him? Or would he eat me out of degradation? It isn't cannibalism if we are not the same species.

The mushroom tea may not be enough. Perhaps it is all in the clawed hands of the Corpse Angel herself, should any divinity guide our fates. I feel safer in her graveyard-cold hands than I do in those of a One God, who has proven to be beyond measure in his wanton malice and matchless in his irony. The angel is simple. She wants blood, screams, flesh, and is delighted to share the bounty with her coven. The line blurs – does Eidermark flourish because of my vision and leadership, does Will love me for my merits, or is it her divine guidance and protection?

Will takes my hand.

I lead him into the sacrificial cavern. It has been prepared for us, bathed in torch light, my coven assembled, masked and ready. Lord Tobias has been prepared, strung up by ropes that come from opposite walls of the cave, fixed pulleys on spikes that have been driven into the rock. He is tightly gagged, his arms and hands bound in front of him in a forced prayer position. Buddish the Mad has already done his work; the skin of the traitor's back has been flayed off, stretched out into angel's wings held aloft by the hooked wires. It is skin only that has been peeled away from the muscle – he lives, suspended in his atrocious suffering, tilted

forward and just high enough that his face can still be reached by someone standing on the ground.

At our entrance, two of my coven work together to remove the gag from his mouth, filling the cavern with his ragged breaths and keens and whimpers. His proud face is broken by agony, slick with tears and sweat. “Your… Highness… Will, Prince Will, please… help me… help me! Don’t let him…!”

Will stares curiously up at Tobias, blinking slowly as if trying to determine if what he is seeing is real or not.

I rest my hands on his shoulders, leaning towards the back of his ear. Even through the mask, I revel in his scent, darkly sweet and vital, a sugared musk drizzled with honey. I speak, my voice softly muffled. “Every life is a piece of music. Like music, we are finite events, unique arrangements. Sometimes harmonious, sometimes dissonant.”

Will turns, giving me his devastating profile. I could look at the edges of his lips and the turn of his nose for hours at a time. I turn to Buddish the Mad and deliver a slow, grave nod. He retrieves one of the ceremonial blades from the rack on the wall, a wicked obsidian thing with an ancient origin, its handle studded with rough rubies that gleam red-black in the torchlight. He hands it to me, and I slip the handle down Will’s arm until it’s reached his hand.

He takes it, hefting the grip.

“No, no, no.” Tobias’s pleading has gotten him nowhere, and he’s returned to his more natural state of indignance, affronted, really, that he should have been found out and will die like this. “No, you wouldn’t dare!” As if he hadn’t witnessed for himself what my darling is capable of. “A plague and a curse on this house, on the Lecter name, on your families…!”

“You tried to kill him,” Will says. His voice is the only one in the room that rings clear, unmuffled by a mask, besides that of our victim.

“Oh, is this the part where you call me a traitor to the crown and Eidermark?” Tobias sneers, though I can see the fear slowly coating his eyes, a rime of frost as he beholds the beautiful death that awaits him. “Where you speak to me of honor and loyalty?”

Will slowly shakes his head no, his pupils blown wide, covering blue sky with shadow. “You tried to kill him,” he repeats. “You tried to kill *someone I love.”*

I can’t speak for the rest of my coven, but I feel the dank oppression of the cave leave me. Its subterranean chill cannot touch me. Thousands of tons of rock soar above us but if it should fall, it would not hurt me, would not crush us. I am light and color and air. I am alive.

He loves me.

“Don’t you know what happens to people who do that?” Will asks dreamily, taking a step forward, the dagger held loosely at his side.

Tobias's vitriol is silenced and he stares down at Will like he is a walking horror, a grotesque nightmare that has broken through from the world of dreams, instead of a beautiful omega in a black robe.

"I'll show you," Will says, his voice soft. Mild, borderline kindly.

In contrast, he lifts the knife and slashes it across Tobias' throat, the wound crafted with deadly expertise. The essence of the musician's life flows out of him in a symphony of blood, the arteries spurting a wave of red down on Will's face, baptizing him into my coven.

"See?" he murmurs. "*See?*"

The whispered chants of my black-cloaked flock have murmured beneath this moment like the streams that seep through these webbed caverns, but now they erupt, the faithful raising their hands to the statue of Moragnethe, which looms in the torchlight as a menacing afterthought to what Will and I have created, a literal corpse angel, her image made now from still-warm flesh pleading with blank, unseeing eyes.

Will turns to me, splashed in blood. It runs in black rivulets down his face and neck, glimmers in his hair. My own blood ignites, immolating every chamber of my heart as it pounds in my chest, each contraction of the powerful muscle pumping molten ruby, saturating my body inside and out, drawing its vitality from the scent pouring into my nose and mouth. My omega, and the rich, precious metal mined from the veins of our enemy. Our sacrifice.

He lifts the dripping blade and there is a wonderful moment where I am curious who he'll kill next, even if it's me.

Randall approaches. He'd better be careful. But Will lets him take the dagger and scurry away with it. Will's eyes are fixed on me and he edges closer, oblivious to the activity that buzzes around us, filling the cave with echoed prayers, joyful chants, and celebratory shouts as my coven lowers the still twitching body and begins to unwrap it. We can't have all those ropes in the way of the ravens' feast.

Will raises a hand to my face, stroking my mask dreamily as I slip my hands around his slender waist, bunching up the robe's flowing cloth so I can feel his dimensions more keenly.

"You are the most beautiful thing I have ever seen." My confession is unadorned, the truth elegant in its simplicity, a delicate chain from which a single pearl dangles.

His response is to place his other hand on the mask and lean forward, pressing his bloody lips against those carved in the polished wood that separates us.

I grip him by the shoulder blade and the sweet curve of his lower back and crush him to me. For a moment, I tremble at the edge of a precipice – if I don't keep some shreds of self-control, I will go into rut, and any children that result would not have an ironclad claim to the throne. I already had my fall rut, triggered by his heat, and not long ago – it shouldn't be possible, but I've come to realize everything about Will is a miracle.

He senses it, perhaps, even in his phantasmagoric, blood-drunk state, and releases my mask, slipping back a few inches.

My body acts before my mind can grapple it. I cast off the mask into Baroness Komeda's surprised hands and kiss him, crushing him against me. He makes a sweet sound of surprise, as if he didn't know what I was desperate to do. I can taste our victim's blood on his lips and I tongue more into his mouth, tangling my fingers in his hair, the curls stiffened and sticky with gore. His response is to wrap his arms around my neck and push up from the floor, hooking a leg around my waist. I read him easily – we know each other so well now – and lift him into my arms, kissing his bloody throat, threatening us with ruin again as I lick ruby droplets from the skin stretched over his mating gland.

Lost in taste and sensation, I barely feel Randall's pull on the sleeve of my robe. "Sire. The feast?"

My instinctive growl makes him recoil, which gives me a childish sense of satisfaction, like poking an insect to watch it roll into a ball.

"Feast?" Will wonders dreamily.

"Yes, beloved," I murmur against his ear, before drawing its sweet lobe into my mouth to suck it clean of blood spatter. "The feast is life. We eat it, and live. Are you hungry?"

He nods with a guileless smile.

So, ignoring the aching swell of my cock beneath my robes, I take his hand and escort him out the other end of the cavern and out into the crisp night. I show him the longhouse, and lead him to the great table made ready. The requested organs given to me in a dish for the burnt offering I will allegedly make alone before I prepare the meal.

I leave Will in the Komedas' hands, and they dote on him, bringing him wine, letting him touch the decorative centerpieces that in his vision might be moving, the skulls snapping their teeth, the flowers breathing their petals open and shut. My coven is elated for me, and an initiation is always a time of celebration. The night is cold but only the smallest breeze stirs the dry leaves or rattles them in the trees, and there is enough heat from the fireplace and good cheer to keep those at the table warm.

It's time to cook.

Tonight, we are having purple artichokes that arrived on a boat from Houtland only yesterday, served to complement Lord Tobias's liver, lungs, and heart, which I pare and chop and cook, seasoning with white wine, garlic, rosemary, oil, salt, and pepper.

Another prayer to our beloved corpse angel before the feast begins. I don't mind worshiping something that doesn't pretend to be what it is not. She loves killing. She does it all the time. There is no semblance of mercy, of divine love. Her aspect is fearsome. She does not hide behind heavenly messengers or speak through a beam of light. Does not promise salvation, judge our actions, only to drop a cathedral dome on a faithful congregation a moment later.

Besides, she answers prayers. She answered mine.

I lift a morsel of heart to Will's lips, and he eats from my hand, sucking my finger clean. He closes his eyes, dark lashes resting starkly on his pale cheeks made golden in the firelight. "Mmm," he hums.

As the meal continues, a jostle of noise and celebration around us, an auditory cocoon of Will's metamorphosis, I watch him glance around the table at my coven, seeing their faces now that they've removed their masks, eyes traveling to the Komedas, to Buddish the Mad, to Dr. Sutcliffe the Elder, even to Randall, who is feigning a festive spirit, poor pining creature.

Will's smile is sublime, closed-lipped and loving, his eyes shimmering with tears.

"What do you see?" I ask, guiding his blood-smeared chin back towards me, stroking it with the pad of my thumb as he slides a hand over my thigh.

Again, that smile – I would send my armies to certain death for it. Sell my soul. Perhaps I already have.

"I see family," he says. Laying a hand on mine where it cups his face, he adds, "My family. *You're my family.*"

"And you're mine," I whisper against his lips before kissing him. I can taste the assassin's heart in his mouth now instead of my own.

Let Others Light Their Candles

Chapter Summary

> Will confronts Hannibal on a family matter, and sneaks through his window like in the old love stories.

Will has been pouring through the history of Eidermark, combing through every volume in the library on the subject. I sense he's been looking for something specific, an obscure event or detail, but has yet to discover it. If he'd ask me, I'm sure I could assist – I have my kingdom's timeline stored in my memory palace, dates and battles and rulers' treaties stored orderly within its walls.

After I finish hearing complaints from an emissary sent by farmers on the border of Houtland, I postpone my next meeting to visit him instead. I find my beloved curled up on the padded window seat of his sitting room, another history tome weighing down on his lap, supported by a pillow on his knee. His forehead has the sweetest puckered look of concentration. Winston sleeps on the floor nearby but lifts his head from his paws at my approach, tail arcing up in a lazy swipe. Georgia is asleep in a chair nearer the hearth with a half-knitted stocking in her lap. We are deeper into autumn now and the darkness creeps in sooner and sooner as the days pass.

Will hasn't heard me open the door, or pretends he hasn't, so absorbed is he in his reading. I stalk over to him, using every shred of stealth I've developed in my years of martial study. He doesn't notice me until I slip the book closed and slide it out of his grip. He jumps, sweetly open-mouthed, then furrows his brow, edging out his lower lip. "You lost my place," he scowls.

"I haven't." I reach into the pocket of my jacket and withdraw what looks like a raven feather made of thin dark gray metal. The feather's pin has a hook on the end, from which dangle silver chains with charms attached. One is a silver replica of my family crest. The other is a coin shape with a scripted W stamped on it. I slide the feather shaped strip of metal into the proper place in the book, close it, and hand it back to him, showing him how the charms dangle on the spine.

He takes the book back and opens it, marveling at the bookmark for a moment, examining the charms. "I've never seen a bookmark like this before."

"I designed it," I tell him, letting myself puff up a bit. It is clever and I think he likes the gift.

"You should make a fish shaped one," Will suggests with a little smirk as I sit on the window seat, lifting his legs up and out of the way before settling his slippered feet in my lap.

He glances over at Georgia, but she's still asleep.

I rest his calves on my thighs and he reclines back, setting the book aside. Beautiful. This simple familiarity is a morsel of bread for a starving man, something I am desperate for but is never enough. I find myself teasing at the strip of skin left exposed where the slippers end and his breeches begin, desperate for unmitigated contact. He gives me a warning look, but the subtle shift in his scent betrays his true reaction. Georgia sleeps. The dog sleeps. Our shared solitude is as fragile as an insect's gossamer wing.

We speak softly to cherish it; Jack, Will's alpha protector, has met with me — and presumably with Will – to discuss our scandalous behavior, our wanton delights shared before the vows have been said. His concerns are valid – the closer spring comes, the harder it is to wait. He drives me to distraction. It's almost worse than when he was in heat. Then, I had an excuse to act irrationally. Now I am left on the edge of desire, torn between the logic of preventing bastards and the very real danger of insanity.

We are not supposed to be alone together. Not until the wedding night. But what people say about forbidden fruit is true. In his presence, I am warm. There is light on the horizon. I can breathe. The air is stale and unsatisfying without his scent. I keep one of his nightshirts at my bedside. When the smell fades, I have Georgia switch it for another. If she's told Will, he doesn't say.

"Another month, and you'll have read everything written about Eidermark," I say, thumb glancing over his naked ankle again. I envision licking it, running my tongue around the ball of bone there, perhaps while his legs are in the air, balanced on me while I drive into him.

"Enough to be forgiven for… being Gaulish?"

"The people love you," I assure him.

"They do?" he marvels, wide-eyed for a moment.

"Yes." It's no stretch of the truth, but I know it's hard for him to accept. He spent his childhood being an unwanted firstborn omegan son. When he killed Hobbs the assassin, bucking off every assumption those close to him had about omegas and young men with gentle demeanors, his otherness only grew. Of course, he's surprised; he's been told there's something wrong with him, that the way he is isn't compatible with the way others are.

"Hmm." The corners of his closed-lipped mouth tug up as he considers the implications of being loved by my subjects. I wonder if he makes such a sweet face when he considers the implications of being loved by me.

My hands and my mind are at war, and my hands have the upper. I gather his legs and shift him, sliding him closer by bending his knees, reclining him further on the cushions. His backside presses firmly against my thigh as I loop an arm around his bent knees. This leaves one hand free to do a demon's work.

He props his head up on one bent arm and runs a hand through his hair. Long have I studied the body language of others. If a person wants to be noticed, they touch their hair. My boldness grows, as does the twitching swell of my cock.

"I read all the volumes of Eidermark law, too," Will says.

"I'm aware." I'm also aware of my hand stroking his thigh, wrapping around its muscled curve, strong but still sweetly supple with an omega's natural softness. It's torture not to be able to feel his skin. Even as we speak, I'm imagining it, my mind groping through the darkness, a blind man trying to find his way in a room where someone has rearranged the furniture. All the ways I could conceivably undress him without alerting Georgia.

"There's nothing…" he loses his thought as my touch grows bolder, sliding up the inside of his thigh with firm, worshipful caresses. His pupils blacken even as the ring of gold expands. He shakes his head. "There's nothing i-in there about… *how* a traitor is to be executed."

My hand stills, the knuckle of my smallest finger pressed into the outline of his cock, my senses assaulted on two fronts, forces divided between the faint scent of slick coming from his loins and the ring of his words between my ears. In that brief pause, Georgia snores.

"No execution methods are described," I say, breaking the spell. I run the backs of my fingers up the inside of his other thigh now, my touch lighter, teasing.

"In Gaulemagne, each capital crime has its method. H-hanging f-for murderers, burning for witches, beheadings for treason. Drawing and quartering if the crime is… heinous enough, o-or you want to, ah… make an example."

"Have you ever seen one of your Gaulish executions carried out?" My hand leaves his leg and steals up to the laces of his trousers. They're a lovely oaken shade, and it pleases me to see him wearing the clothing I've provided for him – a rich goldenrod shirt, tied at the neck, with ribbed sleeves ending in cuffs of subtle lace. The bottom hem just skims his waistline; it's meant to be worn under the longer gold, ochre, and green damask jacket that hangs on the back of a chair nearby, cinched tight to the body.

"No," Will says, not looking at my hand. But he is aware of it, his cheeks absorbing color like a cloth dropped on spilled rosy ink. "Delicate omega, remember? My, ah, my constitution… isn't fit to see such things." Each word is curled with irony.

"But I assume they are otherwise well-attended."

He nods. "Crowds filling the *Place de l'Harmonie* to bear witness."

"For spectacle."

He nods. I see a tiny indent in his lower lip as he draws it further in, pressing his teeth into it before torturing me with its slow release. "Tasteless," he mutters.

“Which is why,” I explain, my fingertips delicate as I find the hem of his shirt, such a lovely autumn color, “in Eidermark, we do not execute publicly.”

“So that your people aren’t… tempted to jeer, t-to, ah… want the spectacle.”

“I find it tasteless, as you said.” I push his hem up half an inch, bringing it just to the waist of his trousers. Another movement, and I will see flesh. “My subjects do not need to be desensitized to violence.”

“But you’re more than happy to display the bodies,” Will states. He’s so intent on pressing forward with this line of inquiry that he doesn’t notice my hand until it’s too late. My palm finds the satiny skin of his belly, caressing it reverently, the barrier of cloth gone at last. While other parts of him are taut with muscle, strength earned by his compulsive training sessions with Jack he thinks I don’t know about, I can feel the fertile curve here where muscles give way to softness beneath the skin, a malleability, prepared to stretch, accommodate, as my children grow within him.

I swallow down a possessive growl, but I’m sure my eyes are red. “Capital punishment is meant to be a deterrent.”

“You won’t let them see the execution, but you’ll make h-human scarecrows, or… impale them to rot over the bridge?”

“Is there a hypocrisy you’re implying?” I know how to make him stop talking. My palm glides up his chest, and the blush on his face deepens.

“I’m trying to *understand you*,” Will confesses in a hot whisper, grabbing my hand through his shirt. Just when I think he’s going to force it away, he snatches it tight and guides it to his hardened nipple.

I can’t stop the growl of satisfaction that erupts in my throat, muffled only by my closed lips. I close my eyes as well, savoring the feeling of his peaked nub between my fingers, edging it with my nail before delivering a brief squeeze. I gather his gently rounded muscle in my hand, a greedy grope, and open my eyes to see him with his head tipped back, neck flushing up from his pinkened decolletage. I delight in the vision that plays out on the stage of my mind – this part of him growing, softening, filling with the milk to nurture our children. My instincts scream *BREED*. My heart shouts *CHERISH* while what is left of my functioning mind orders me to leave this room. I’ve been warned.

“*I want to understand you!*” he whispers, a desperate hiss. “I want to trust you.” A surge of his scent now as he is, no doubt, growing wetter by the second. “But I can’t do either of those things… if you k-keep drugging my tea and keeping your secrets.”

“*Will*,” is all I can say, my palm gliding down to his stomach again, then resting dangerously on the laces of his breeches. He guides it lower, and I don’t resist, grinding his delightful little omegan bulge against the heel of my hand, then rubbing its contours firmly with my thumb.

“Do you trust me?” Will breathes through rosy lips.

I can feel his wetness against my fingertips as I fondle him, my cock throbbing now, my mouth thirsty for his. “I want you to know me.” He arches up an inch or two, tilting his hips to press into my licentious hand. “See me.”

“I-It’s a gift,” he says, interrupted by a moan. “I want it. Please… I want to know.”

“Will, beloved…”

“Why Moragnethe… the Corpse Angel? An Old God, and a-a minor one – using the cult to execute traitors – I can’t… you don’t really believe in her, in the rituals, do you?”

To silence his questions, which cannot be answered in the fragile time we have left before someone discovers our indiscretion, I cut my instincts’ leash. Before he can take another breath, I’m on top of him, my body between his legs, holding him down on the cushioned bench seat. “Han–” he manages before I snare his lips with mine, unable to resist grinding myself against him. I feel every thread of resistance snap and he is warm honey in my hands, sweet and malleable and clinging to me in any way he can.

As much as I want to breed him, I could kiss him forever. It’s a skill he comes by naturally, admitting my tongue and meeting it perfectly with his own, his lips supple without being wet, and his taste, no matter what he’s eaten or the time of day, is always delectable. He says he can’t dance, but the way he kisses reminds me of a coordinated reel where he knows every step.

Just as I slip a hand between his legs to grope him again, Winston sits up, taut as a bowstring. The movement is so swift it draws my attention from the one thing I want most in the world. The dog’s eyes are fixed on the door. I release Will and shift away from him on the bench seat. He reads my movements and slides upright, pawing at his book to put over his lap.

The door opens, and Jack comes in, dusty from the training ground. I see his nostrils flare and the red ring of his pupil expand. His hand clamps on the hilt of his dagger and the cords in his neck and forearm swell to the surface. An unbidden growl tears out of me even as Will’s mouth opens to give what I assume will be a sharp word of warning.

Georgia sits up with a snort, dropping her knitting, then scrabbling at her skirts trying to catch it. Her bleary movements break the spell and Jack’s hand drifts away from his weapon. His eyes return to their normal shade of brown-black, but his scent is suddenly everywhere, raising the hairs on the back of my neck and flooding my muscles with tension.

“Jack,” Georgia says, patting down stray hairs that have escaped her braid. “I was just–” She follows his gaze to me, and her eyes widen. “It was… just for a minute,” she explains in a rush as she gets to her feet, twisting her poor knitting in her hands, stretching her careful weaving out of shape. Does she mean her nap, or our moments of indiscretion?

Either way, the response is the same. Jack stands back from the door, watching me. He cannot order me away – I am the sovereign. But I gave my word, and so I stand to leave, making no attempt to hide the outline of my cock in my trousers. Still, I keep my face and voice arranged. “Have a pleasant evening, beloved,” I say, reaching for Will’s hand. He lifts it

to me with a longing look that can't be masked by his wry expression of *now look what you've done.*

I kiss the backs of his fingers, and leave. Jack closes the door behind me and waits until I'm most of the way down the corridor to begin his booming lecture.

I have several documents to review and sign waiting on my desk. I listen with half an ear as Randall explains them to me, struggling to focus. I hope I haven't made my mark on something with loopholes. After, I order him and everyone else away, refusing supper as well. It's late, dark, the wind sighs against the windowpanes of the music room where I play harpsichord by candlelight. Playing is an inaccurate descriptor. I pound the keys, flog the instrument, sweat rolling down my forehead. I play wild melodies that clash in fervent dissonance, trying to drown out his voice in my head.

You tried to kill someone I love.

Someone I love.

Will has a brilliant mind and I trust him to put the pieces together. I'm unsure, however, what will happen when he does, and I will have no rest until I know that I gave him a rare gift, and that he *wanted* it.

I know I am dreaming. The knowledge does not lessen the terror I feel when the monsters come for my sister, dragging her away from me. I am too weak to fight them, too weak to do anything save weep and keen out her name. Mischa! Mischa!

But someone else is here.

Will steps out of the lodge's cold shadows, looking just as he did the night he killed my assassin in front of the entirety of Eidermark's court. Lavishly dressed, splattered with blood, and holding an angel's wing in one hand that tapers down into a dagger's blade. Silver and red run together.

They laugh at him. He is an omega, what can he do?

Oh, my love's reckoning is a thing of beauty.

Will slashes the throat of Vladis Grutas. He lets go of Mischa's arm to bring his hands to his rubied throat, eyes wide with disbelief. Will shoves himself between Petras Kolnas and Mischa, seizing the wrist of the hand that holds her and squeezing. The dagger sinks into Kolnas' gut, and Will drags it across his belly, ripping him open. He falls back with a strangled cry, landing hard on his back, holding his organs in with slippery, useless hands.

I see now, the bjørn he will be. Woe to anyone who dare threaten a child he cares for; he will become the bear mother, the mongoose under the house when the snakes slither by.

Will sheathes his dagger back into the necklace and slips it into his shirt, then lifts the crying girl from the floor, holding her tenderly in his arms, rocking her. She clings to his neck and he

strokes her hair with his bloody hand. "Shh, shh, it's all right, it's all right now…"

He looks at me. Smiles, softly loving, paternal. He holds out his hand, and I can smell him, his honeyed scent overpowering anything else in the air: blood, unwashed bodies, smoke, terror. The scent is so real it conjures doubt. Maybe this isn't a dream. Maybe time did reverse. The teacup that shattered came together. The place is made for Mischa in my world. A place is made for all of us. Together.

I open my eyes.

Will is standing at my bedside.

I close my eyes. I must have slept. I tossed and turned for what felt like hours, but I must have succumbed, the wine I drank to aid the process sinking me so far down that I am coming back up in fits and starts. I am still half dreaming.

A hand on my forehead, pushing my hair back, stroking my skin with a feather-light touch. "*Hannibal*."

I open my eyes. Will is still there, still a vision in cold moonlight. His hand is a cool heaven against my damp forehead. He's wearing a long white nightshirt with billowing sleeves, and his eyes are searching for something.

"How did you get out of your chamber?" I murmur, slowly rising, the blankets falling away from my chest. I felt feverish in the evening and hadn't worn anything to bed besides a loose pair of short pants

Will doesn't answer for a long moment, looking at my body. His first glimpse of it makes his tongue steal between his lips, moistening them so they shine, the gold in his eyes expanding around the pupil. He moves a few inches back, shakes his head and looks at my face again. "I snuck a rope under my bed. Then I tied it to the railing of the balcony and slid down. Went around the other side and climbed up the garden wall. Onto the, ah, the ledge by the library windows, then up the trellis there where the vines with the purple flowers grow..."

The trellis in question is fixed to the palace wall and would bring him right up to my balcony. "What a clever boy you are," I breathe, the heat in my fevered body stoked by his nearness. I caress him with my gaze, noting the gossamer nightshirt and his bare feet. "No shoes?"

"I needed my toes to climb." Will gives an involuntary shiver.

Whether it's the cold or anticipation, my offer remains the same. I lift the blankets and slide over, beckoning him. "I'd considered using a similar route to get to you. In the old stories, it's always the alpha who climbs the trellis to the omega's window," I tease softly.

He lifts one foot to slide in next to me, then hesitates, lowering it to the rug again. "I-I didn't come here for…"

I can't stop my face from displaying my inner pout for a moment before I arrange it again. "That doesn't mean you can't warm yourself."

"I don't trust… either of us," Will says, visually struggling with his hesitation, drumming the fingers of one hand against his thigh.

"Will," I plead. "I don't want bastard heirs any more than you do. Please. You'll catch cold."

He makes me wait a full breath. Inhale, exhale. "All right," he says, hugging himself against the draft. He gets in, curling up under the covers, pulling them tightly around his shoulders. He looks so beautiful and small like this, his curls spilling over my pillow, filling my bed with his scent. I leave a torso's width of space between us, as much as I ache to close it. We lay on our sides, looking at one another. I keep my head propped up on my hand and bent elbow, and he looks at me from the pillow.

"Hannibal," he says, playing with a silken tassel that hangs from the pillow's edge. "What happened… to your family?"

The blood in my veins goes from molten metal to snowmelt, the icy streams of early spring that flow down from the mountains and chill to the bone. That's why he's been reading the histories – not just to understand the execution laws and try to metabolize what happened in the cave, but because he wants to know about the revolution. The Triumvirate. My family. Mischa.

"You never talk about them," he says, stroking the tassel, then glancing up at me. "And I've tried to ask questions, but nobody will answer. The most I ever got was from the blacksmith. All he said was, 'they were supposed to be in exile.' But I know your father was killed outright and your mother and sister died after. But how did it all happen?" He sighs at the ensuing silence. "You know about me. You know about my parents' assassination, and how Hobbs came for me and for Alana. You know… how it felt to kill him, and what happened after. But you haven't told me anything, Hannibal."

He's right. It isn't fair.

"I never told *anyone* how it felt to kill Hobbs," Will says, inching closer. "Not the truth, anyway. That I… enjoyed it. Just like I… *liked* killing the musician who tried to assassinate you." Three heartbeats' pause. "And I liked… killing Lord Tobias," he finishes softly, looking up at me, his dark lashes sweeping like crows' wings as they alight upon the feast that was once life that they must eat and live.

My cock twitches and I bite the inside of my lower lip, a quick, painful nip, to still it again. "You felt righteous."

He nods, his hair making soft sounds against the velvet cushion I am suddenly jealous of. "I… accept that there are people in this world that are… so bad that, ah… killing them feels good. I know it's un-omegan. I know it disgusts people. I saw Jack's face that night. The night I killed Hobbs. H-he looked at me and… I got the sense that he would have made the

same face, seeing us dead on the floor with our throats cut. In that moment, the thought of me killing a man was just as… appalling…"

The distress that crinkles his brow makes me want to kiss it. Kiss him. "Killing must feel good to God, too," I breathe, my voice flowing back to him over the warm, dark space between us that might as well be a yawning chasm. "Whoever or whatever God is. The creator responsible for all joy and sorrow, the field upon which the deities wage war against one another. Those we've crafted for ourselves – the One God of the Book, the Thirteen Angels, the Old Gods, and those even older, whose names have been lost – battling for supremacy with bloodied swords, not knowing that the grass and the sky and the earth that bear witness to the skirmish are made up of whatever created man so that he could dream up religion."

Will smiles with one corner of his mouth. The fingers that were toying with the pillow tassel slip beneath the blankets again. I can feel the tiny shift in the mattress as they slide unseen toward me. "God's terrific," Will says, his smile wider now. In the dim, I can see the flash of his teeth, the moonlight hugging the curve of his cheek. "Two year ago, in Gaulemagne, they completed a new cathedral on the southern coast. During the very first mass, God must have decided that he, ah… wanted to point out the faulty engineering. The roof fell in, and 34 people died. The faithful, in prayer."

"Did God feel good about that?"

His cool hand slides over mine where it rests palm down on the mattress. "He felt powerful," Will says, just above a whisper. "I know the feeling. And so do you."

In a blink, I've snatched him by the wrist and twisted my body, hauling him on top of me. Another roll and he's trapped under me, where he belongs. Where he longs to be.

He grunts, straining against my hold. "Hannibal." My name as a warning, which I would take more seriously if his eyes weren't lit up like beacons guiding me through the darkness. He is my pharos, and he will guide my ship home after all these years.

I lean in to kiss him and he turns his head to the side. If this was a preventative measure, it doesn't turn out as he expected. Kissing his neck is a delight both of us treasure, and I can feel his muscles loosen, hear the change in the soft sounds that drip from his lips. He smells like autumn wind and woodsmoke and his musky sweetness and I breathe in great lungfuls as it grows stronger by the moment, licking over his mating gland, feeling him arch up against me, hard in his own right. He's not wearing anything under the nightshirt. I can tell as I stroke him all over, down his chest, along his ribs. I can feel his nipples against my bare chest.

He shakes his head, as if fighting off an impending fugue or to toss off a lusty daydream in church. "Tell me about your family," he insists.

I release him from my amorous grasp, sliding off him and looking up at the red damask bed curtains stitched with gold antlers. My mind is suddenly deserted of thought. Ways to tell the tale, how to make it palatable. I have nothing in me but the truth. He presses himself against my side, positioning my arm to lay next to me, a hand over my heart.

"The Triumvirate was backed by our enemies. They had more fighters than we'd expected," I begin. "I was nine years old. My sister Mischa was six. My father was slain when the rebels broke into the palace, and the rest of us were taken to a small island north of our border, a barren place they'd cleared of nomads. We were kept prisoner should we be needed to legitimize the Triumvirate's claim to power. One of them could always marry my mother and present themselves as the new king, painting my father as a monster his family was glad to be rid of. But that year, winter came earlier than it has ever come. The ice trapped the ship we'd used to get there. Supplies dwindled. There was nothing to hunt on the island, and no way to fish.

"My mother weakened quickly and caught the sweating sickness. When she died, they buried her in the snow. Afraid to use her, lest they too become ill."

"Use her…" Will murmurs.

"Mischa was inconsolable. I tried to quiet her." I can feel the icy stones of our dungeon cell around me now, the bars and dank walls closing in. But then, Will touches my face, and I do not smell the damp, the rot, the stench of excrement and despair. I lean down and press my face into his hair, breathing deeply, kissing the curls until I'm able to speak again. "They were tired of listening to her cry," is all I can say.

Will sits up, leaning over me, looking down into my eyes. He leans in and kisses the tear that has gathered at the edge of my lashes, the warm droplet clinging to his lip, bearing it away from me and into himself. He strokes my hair.

"I ate some of the stew they made," I whisper.

"I know, I know," he comforts, stroking my face, kissing my forehead. "And that's why you have to *eat*."

I nod.

"I love you," he insists, holding my chin as if I would ever think of turning away. "*I love you.*"

"How can you?" My mouth's question surprises my ears.

"Scales have fallen from my eyes," he whispers against my lips. "*I can see you now*."

Caution not just to the wind, but thrown across the world, borne there by a city-killing tempest of apocalyptic ruin. He kisses me, dragging his hands through my hair. Demands me. Asserts his right to me now. We're conjoined, and neither of us could survive the separation.

There can be no question of my honor, his honor, of our children's conception. It feels like ripping off my own arm, but I press against his shoulders, pushing him up until our lips part. "No," he moans, eyes rolling shut in acute distress.

"I won't let either of us jeopardize our union," I say, to myself and to him. "Is t that what you said when you first came?"

Don't let him beg me. Don't let him say please, I won't survive.

He rolls off me, breathing hard, edging away across the mattress until we aren't touching. My cock aches, my desire is an injury only he can heal.

He turns to me again, chest heaving, cords visible in his neck. "There are things we can do that won't get me pregnant," he says in a hurried whisper.

"There are," I confirm. "But what if I–"

He shifts, reaching for something under the blanket. "*Will*." I'm the one begging, it seems, as he touches me through my undergarment, a hesitant survey of my outline.

"Don't move," he hisses the order, pushing the cloth down and out of his way, freeing my straining cock and stroking it firmly once, twice, spreading the moisture from the tip that hasn't already soaked into my clothing. His hand is warm now, and I whimper like an injured child when he lets go only to moan like a whore when he touches me again, having reached between his legs and wet his hand with his slick.

Not being able to see what he's doing beneath the blankets heightens the sensation. He seems nervous at first, teasing inadvertently, but finds confidence, I think, in my reaction, which is to moan his name, praise him, tell him he is beautiful and perfect, and utter the truth, which is that no one has ever touched me like this before.

White light breaches the darkness, a sacred dawn, and my orgasm fills me with divine illumination. My knot blossoms and somehow, he knows to cup his hand over it and squeeze, his fingers stretched to their limited circumference to accommodate the girth.

When I can see again, I look at him. No doubt my face is that of a saint in ecstasy, bearing witness to a miracle. I heard the voice of a true God, felt His touch, had a momentary glimpse of heaven.

Will's brows are lifted, puckered, his mouth sweetly parted. "Was that–"

I yank him ungracefully into my arms and smother him in a kiss. "Yes," I breathe into his mouth, the word punctuating my devouring of him. At last, I lay back again, breathing hard, still half-blinded.

"You feel… big," Will whispers, fear wrapped in delight wrapped in fear.

I pull him close again. It would be a sincere pleasure to spoon him, but I don't trust myself in that position. Instead, we face each other under the damp sheets, though he lays an arm on top of the duvet now, more than warm enough. I put an arm behind his head, and we press our foreheads together. When I touch him in turn through the thin fabric of his nightshirt, he jumps, nervy. "Shh," I soothe, bunching up the cloth against his thigh and drawing it up enough to gain access. A lingering caress over the curve of his ass and I'm back to business, which is to pleasure him.

He's so wet. Slick coats his inner thighs. I know it's on the sheets and I will have his lingering scent long after this sweet stolen rendezvous is over. My fingers slip up to his seam, teasing along the lips of his opening and feeling the topography. Again, I can only imagine it. All I see is a blurred, up close watercolor of his face from this angle and his hand gripping the duvet. He trembles when I slip my finger in, my hand coated in slick, and then anoint his erect cock, which I have to think is a healthy size for an omega. Even more so as it swells further at my touch and he whines, a needy sound that cuts through my civilized brain and appeals directly to my instincts.

I slide my fingers along his opening again and slip two within now. His entrance is furnace-hot. Ignoring his cock, I feel for the half-walnut shaped rise within, the one named after the god of love of the Old Religion: Neithaal's Rise, studied rather extensively by some of Dr. Sutcliffe the Elder's students at the Physician's College, thought to be the source of an omega's most powerful pleasure, only accessible by an alpha's knot; this discovery lends credibility to the commonly held belief that, for an omega, there is nothing quite like sex with an alpha.

He squirms, breathing hard. I abandon my blind quest and stroke his cock now, wrapping it firmly in my fist. The way his breath hitches is infinitely sweet, and it isn't more than a minute before he spills, his emission polite, dainty compared to the gouts that came from me. Enough to get another omega pregnant, or a beta woman.

"Hannibal," he breathes, then moans my name again, louder, as I drift my fingers back again, determined to find his sweet spot. This time, I do, and stroke it with the pads of my fingers, my thumb pressed against the base of his cock, which hasn't softened yet. "What are you…?" he only gets part of the question out. "That feels…" Voice strained, like he isn't sure, torn between pleasure and discomfort.

"Let me try."

He nods, his damp curls tickling my brow.

I increase my pace and pressure.

"Something's…" he murmurs. "I think something's… ah…!"

"Will–"

"Don't stop!" he commands, gripping the side of my face, and I keep working my fingers against him.

And then it happens. He clenches, the wet muscle of his opening catching my fingers even as more slick flows around them, soaking my hand in a warm rush. His second orgasm seems to have twice the effect on him as the first, and he drags his nails, short as they are, down my face, eliciting a growl of delight. Let's hope they haven't broken the skin – I'll have a hard time explaining marks like that.

I hold him close, his face buried in my neck, breaths fanning over my damp skin, clutching me as if he's afraid of being stolen away. Now a languid, satisfied kiss. In the

warm, damp depths of our nest we curl together. I am swaddled in a loving comfort I have never known, not since before my family was killed, and perhaps not even then, and I know in my heart he's thinking the same.

"I'll never understand what I've done in my life to deserve you," I whisper against his hair.

"Maybe it's what was done *to* you," he murmurs, half-asleep.

I consider his words with post-orgasm clarity. What was done to me. What was done to him. What we could do to each other now to restore some sense of balance.

My musing ceases abruptly when I black out, exhausted from the gluttony of pleasure. When I wake, he is gone, and I'm hard again, left to touch myself as I breathe in the rich scent of his arousal on my sheets.

Reasons the Card, but Passion the Gale

Chapter Summary

At last, a wedding, and a wedding night.

“Do you hear it?” Hannibal brushed his hand down Will’s back, then lifted it to tease through the curls on the back of his neck.

“I do!” Georgia said, raising her fists to her mouth to cover her grin.

Will strained his ears over the murmured voices of the king’s advisers, courtiers, and the palace’s staff, gathered in the courtyard just as they’d been the day Will arrived. It was spring again, and Will had celebrated his birthday two months before. He’d received many fine gifts, though his favorites had come from Hannibal, of course – a beautifully illuminated copy of all of his pamphlets gathered together, with more copies being made, ready to be placed in libraries at the various academies, and a puppy the king gone into the countryside to select himself. The wriggly little thing was the spitting image of Buster, but with a white streak down its nose and whiter on the legs and belly. Her dark ears, though shaped the same, were lined with light fawny fur at the edges. The same color was patterned around her eyes, giving her a permanently curious look that was adorable to distraction.

They’d named her Heidi, and while the dog was supposed to be Will’s, the little creature seemed to imprint on Hannibal first, preferring him until Will won her over. Still, she slept in a basket in the king’s chamber, and seeing Hannibal’s tenderness with the animal further stoked the flames in Will’s heart.

He’s going to be a good father.

“I hear it now!” he said as Georgia grabbed his hand and bounced on her toes in excitement.

“You’re imagining things,” Jack chided from behind him. He hadn’t joked with Will like this in ages, spending more time hovering over him like the dragons of myth curled covetously around their hoarded gold, doing his best to keep Will and Hannibal in check. The man must have been exhausted, Will realized. But now, Jack could taste freedom, and was at last back to his jovial self, his easy smile reminding Will of the many years of their friendship. While it was frustrating, being kept from Hannibal, he knew that Jack had always done whatever was needed to protect him, including the unthinkable – training an omega to protect himself.

“Huh. I don’t hear *anything*,” Jack insisted with a gap-toothed grin.

“Well, old ears don’t catch as much,” Will sassed back, drawing a nearly silent chuckle from Hannibal and a donkey’s bray laugh from Georgia.

“You’ve aged me prematurely, Your Highness,” Jack snarked. “You *both* have.”

From the city across the bridge came the sound of a roaring populace, the capitol’s citizens lining the streets in welcome, just as when Will had arrived. Within a few anxious minutes Will saw the royal carriage and retinue emerge from behind a building and flow out onto the lane. The assembled crowd erupted into cheers as well, waving handkerchiefs or their hats in the warm gusts of spring breeze. Will couldn’t believe Hannibal wasn’t sweating in his cloak, which was fine indeed, scarlet, edged in silver fox fur layered with wolf at the shoulders. Will had opted for a high-necked emerald tunic embroidered with yellow and darker gold stitching in leaf patterns, tied with a rich goldenrod sash, the fabric light and airy, which is how he felt.

Will reminded himself again: *he was getting married tomorrow.* He felt like if he jumped high enough, he’d rise into the sky and unfurl black wings and soar.

Black wings, like those of the crows perched on the metal stag’s antlers that crowned the bridge to the palace. There was no fresh sacrifice, but the tattered remains of Tobias – some scraps of cloth and dangling bones – still hung from the spikes in their place of shameful honor.

The carriage – the same one, presumably, he’d ridden in all those months ago – God, a lifetime ago – pulled to a stop in the center of the courtyard. The Gaulish footmen hurried down from their posts to open the door. Out stepped Will’s beta sister Alana, her dark orange and blue bell-sleeved dress a burst of color in the spring sunshine. She threw off her cloak, and a footman did his best to awkwardly catch it before it fell on the cobblestones. “Will!” she cried, gathering her skirts, and running toward him.

Hannibal let go of Will’s hand he’d been holding and touched his lower back, sending Will surging forward to catch her in his arms. She wore her hair long and loose, and it whipped around his face as the breeze picked up. They were both laughing like children, Will gripping her by the small of her back and lifting her up to give her a shake like he’d always done when they were younger. “Will, oh! Will, you look – you look wonderful, you look well, are you well?” she said through peals of delighted laughter.

“I am, and you…?”

“Never better,” she assured him as he set her down. She cleared her throat as he released her, and smoothed her skirt and hair, glancing over his shoulder at the imposing figure of Hannibal.

“Don’t worry about him,” Will said, bending down to speak against her ear. “I have him wrapped around my finger.”

She grinned and took his arm. They approached the King of Eidermark, who seemed wider and taller than usual with his furred cloak and the stag’s antler crown on his head. Yet his eyes were kind and his smile softly genuine as Alana curtseyed to him. “May I present my sister, Alana of the House of Beauregard-Devereaux, princess of Gaulemagne,” Will said in a grand voice that warped through his mischievous smile.

“Princess Alana. Welcome to Eidermark. My betrothed has long anticipated your visit.” Hannibal took Alana’s hand in both of his and clasped it for a long moment. “Would you care to rest after your journey? Eat?”

“No, no, I want to see everything,” Alana insisted, “though Your Majesty is very kind. My escorts would appreciate rest and repast, though.”

Georgia nodded. “I’ll see to it, Your Highness.”

“Georgia, thank you, wonderful to see you.” Alana opened her arms and beckoned Georgia into a brief squeeze. Georgia’s brows shot up, but she readily accepted the hug, then swept off, sticking her fingers between her teeth to whistle, motioning to the drivers as to where they should pull the conveyances around towards the stables.

“What a beautiful home,” Alana sighed, looking up at the rose-colored bricks and the arched windows. “Right on the water, Will, that’s perfect for you.”

“It is,” Will agreed. “You want to see the dogs?”

“Yes! I’ve missed them almost as much as you,” she said with a gay laugh, her blue eyes sparkling as she snatched up his hand.

“I’ll join you later,” Hannibal said, leaning in to press his lips on the shell of Will’s ear before Alana dragged him off to get a tour of the gardens and grounds. He showed her everything; the dogs, their kennels, the kitchen garden where he and Hannibal had planted their own herbs, the training ground, and the two lovely fishing boats Hannibal had given him, one large with a canopied section in the back to provide shade, the other small enough for two, meant for short jaunts or cooler weather.

Now they sat for a moment beneath a blossoming tree, the wind shaking petals down on their hair as ducks and geese flew south overhead. “It’s lovely to see good old Jack,” Alana said with a tender smile. “I brought him letters and gifts from his wife. Bella misses him so much.”

“I know he’s, ah… he’s ready to go home,” Will said. He hoped it was entirely true. Jack had been increasingly agitated in the weeks leading up to the wedding. How he knew that Will had snuck out to Hannibal’s chamber that night in November he couldn’t be sure, but there were several possibilities. Will had been seen, or he’d smelled Will’s scent in the king’s apartments. Either way, he’d had Will on an increasingly tight leash ever since. Part of it, Will knew, was his sworn duty as a knight of Gaulemagne to protect the kingdom’s interests. A bastard with shaky claim to the throne, and a prince with loose morals were equally dangerous, robbing the match of political advantage.

But part of it, Will thought, was Jack’s long-standing obligation to protect Will, an obligation that began when his parents were killed and Will was left alone, an omega and a murderer, helpless and damaged. He’d taught Will to fight, to ease his fears about defending himself against future attacks and helped raise him. And while it wasn’t something Will had ever seen coming, he wondered if, now that he’d come of age, Jack’s Alpha instincts had rebelled against his common sense and were trying to change the nature of their relationship.

“I think you’ll like his replacement well enough,” Alana said, plinking in another pebble. “Miriam’s sharp – I’ve always been impressed with her. And strong – I’ve seen her best an alpha in hand-to-hand sparring. I think people underestimate her because of her size and those pretty eyes.”

“And what will occupy her time, if she’s not having to chase me around and stop me from besmirching my honor?” Will wanted to know. Though he asked it lightly, he was genuinely curious and more than a little suspect.

“She’ll continue to ensure your safety and happiness here,” Alana explained. “Acting on Gaulemagne’s behalf, making sure you’re well-kept and–”

“Making sure I’m doing my very best to get a loaf of bread in my oven?” Will asked, arching his brow.

“Something like that. The more heirs, the safer your position will be, the stronger our alliance with Eidermark could become.”

Will hummed, watching a sea bird wheel in the sky through gaps in the fragrant pink canopy above them. “I think our dear uncle sent her here to make sure the rest of those angel’s blood weapons are forged and sent to complete the trade. She’ll have to wait a lot longer for that task to wrap up than she’ll have to wait for me to… you know.”

Alana’s cheeks reddened a little, and Will shifted where he sat, not meeting her gaze. After a moment, the princess sighed and combed her hair over one shoulder. “My heart broke for you when you left,” she said, picking up a petal and rubbing it between her fingers. “I’d heard so many awful things about the King of Eidermark… his… well, you know, you heard the same.” She pressed her lips together, drawing her hair over her shoulder. “Will, the scarecrows at the border… and the bones on the bridge…?”

“Traitors to the crown,” Will said, plucking the petals from a bloom and adding them to the rest that carpeted the young grass beneath them. “We have to set examples. Eidermark is a peaceful place and, ah… some kingdoms might take our peace and our quest to bring our subjects the best life we can as… weakness. There was a civil war here when Hannibal was a child.”

“He’s… he isn’t…” She swept petals from her dress busily, buying herself time to think, Will assumed.

“He isn’t a brutal man who rules by fear,” Will assured her, tilting his hand so the rosy sunlight illuminated his engagement ring. “He’s brilliant. He wants to rule fairly, for his people to be well-fed and educated. His academies admit omegan students, did you hear?”

“They do?” Her brows climbed again, creating a wrinkled pucker.

“And there are changes to come,” Will told her with a conspiratorial smile.

She sighed, getting to her feet. He stood as well, and she took both of his hands in hers. “I don’t care about all of that,” she admitted. “I just want to know if you’re happy, Will. Please,

tell me the truth. You don't have to put on a brave face."

"There's no face," Will insisted with a smile. "I am. Happy, that is. I hated it at first, but…" He felt heat flower over his face, likely making his cheeks match the blushed blossoms that danced in the breeze. "I love him. I really do, I'm not just… trying to make the most of a situation I couldn't control."

She threw her arms around his neck again and hugged him close. "I'm so glad to hear it," she said, voice thick with joyful tears. "I can only hope our cousin finds a suitable arrangement for me where I could be half as happy."

"I hope so, too," Will said as she released him, giving her shoulders an affectionate squeeze. "And how is dear insufferable Frederick?"

She rolled her eyes with a curled-lip scoff. "Well enough, I suppose. He's enjoying life as regent, as always." They followed a little path down to the water's edge and sat on a stone bench. Alana scooped up a few pebbles and tossed them into the water as they spoke. "He asked for my help planning Matthew's coronation celebrations. He'll be the Sovereign King of Gaulemagne a year from now."

Will bent to find pebbles of his own. When they were children, they'd spent hours throwing pebbles into the palace garden's fountains, to the point where the groundskeepers had to scoop them out every night only to have Alana and Will toss them in again the next day. Normal children would have been scolded and told not to do it, but their station had given them latitude. Tossing one in the shallow water near the shore resulted in a satisfying plunk and the pretty ripples they'd always enjoyed, trying to create as many concentric rings as possible.

"And how much are these… *celebrations* going to cost?" Will asked, raising a disapproving brow.

"Cousin Frederick's going to have to sell the Brimstone Ruby," Alana sighed, referencing Gaulemagne's largest gem in its crown jewel treasury. "Lord Devon of Sylvestri, a Lothien duke, has had an eye on it for years. And Frederick's planning to levy another tax – this time on wine – to recoup some of his spending so Matthew has two coins to rub together."

"A tax on wine?" Unheard of. "He's playing with fire. The Vintners Guild has a-a *monumental* sphere of influence."

She nodded grimly, brushing her hair behind her ear. "It feels like… the entire country is holding on by a thread, hoping that once Matthew has power, he'll put things right again." Her mouth was bloodless, pressed into a pale line.

"Alana," he said, taking her hand so she'd look at him. "You know that's… do people really think…?"

"They give our brother's behavior a lot of latitude. He's a young alpha, after all." The words curled bitterly from her mouth. "But our uncle is preparing, should there be unrest. That's why he's so keen on having the rest of those weapons King Hannibal promised."

“And why you’re keen to marry,” Will murmured, a response to the golden strand whipping across his mind and showing him her perspective. “If you’re sent away somewhere, like I was… you might be safe from…”

She met his gaze, and her eyes were wet. She nodded.

“There you are!”

They both turned to see Georgia hustling across the petal-strewn grass, skirts in her hands. “I know you two haven’t seen each other in a long time, but there will be plenty of time to catch up after the wedding. Come on, Will, the tailor’s here – he wants to do a final fitting!”

Alana’s tears blinked away, and she grinned, hauling Will up from the seat. “Come on, then — I can’t wait to see what you’re wearing!”

In the cave of the Corpse Angel, I keep Lord Tobias’s arm suspended, covered with snails that grow fat on his flesh, the limb preserved in honey and spices. I have come here alone tonight, waking in the darkest hour gripped by fear, desire, the need to possess, true happiness, and the ache of my grief. When the sun rises at last, pouring rosy light through the fissures in the cavern above my head, it will be *the day.* The day that I’m to marry Will. My beloved, my prince, my omega, the other half of my soul, conjoined now. So entwined, I hope, that neither of us would survive a separation.

And yet, as I watch the snails glide across the motionless hand that once made music, I tremble. I fear. There is terror in the unknown.

What if, after everything, when we are at the altar, Will says no? What if he flees? What if his sister helps to spirit him away, back home to Gaulemagne to avoid his arranged marriage to Hannibal the Vicious? He told me he loved me, but it could have been a lie, a lie to buy time, to get close to me and tease out my secrets, only to bear them back to Gaulemagne–

I hate myself for these doubts, for not trusting Will, for not trusting myself. I have used every scrap of knowledge I have to bend him to the suggestion that he loves me. His empathy ensures that he can know me, see me, but I can only pray he has truly accepted my rare gift.

In the end, I am at his mercy. At first, I was curious to see what would happen between us. Now I fear the unknown, because without him, I have no future. I am only a monster crippled by my past.

Today, if he accepts my vows and makes his own, time will reverse. The teacup shattered by the Triumvirate and the men who killed and ate my sister will come back together. But that all depends on Will.

I pluck a handful of snails from the arm, and use my knife to cut off its thumb, cracking the bone from the socket. I place them in an onyx bowl and bring them to the statue of Moragnethe. For once, I make the burnt offering, speaking the ancient words. For once, it doesn't feel like prayers falling upon the deaf ears of the cold universe or a capricious Creator. I have the otherworldly sense that I am, for the first time, speaking to *her*.

"I will be your hand in this world. I will spill blood and feed my kills to your beloved scavengers, human and bird and insect alike. As long as I live, worship of the Old Gods will be allowed, the faithful safe. I will keep the priests of the Book at bay. And when the time comes, I will go forth from these lands and make war. Each corpse left on my battlefield is a sacrifice to you, Moragnethe, Thirteenth Angel, Daughter of Lumeria, Our Lady of Decay, Queen of the Crossroads."

When the sun rises, I too rise from my knees, ending my supplication in front of what is most likely a piece of stone imbued with no supernatural power. If a previous version of myself saw me now, like this, bowing to any kind of god instead of acting as one myself, he would have scorned me. But that Hannibal had never met the one person who could love him for who he is, not *in spite* of it. I will sacrifice this former self, the man who had his life perfectly curated, his kingdom orderly, his grief locked away, content to kill and eat and govern. That king is dead. Long live the king – the man I am today, willing to grovel at the feet of a statue should there be the sliver of a chance of divine intervention.

You see, I could never entirely predict Will. And while that unpredictability has always delighted me, today it fills me with dread.

What if he says no? What if he won't speak the vows?

I will not survive it.

The rites have been performed, and dawn has come. My only recourse is to return to my chambers and bathe away the smell of burning flesh and cave damp and prepare myself for the most significant day of my life.

For being jealous of Will to the point of distraction, Randall has risen to the occasion when planning the festivities. He's bright-eyed and alert, speaking sharply with the attendants, and, to a softer degree, with me as I try to refuse any breakfast. I manage a bowl of porridge and some tea, and the preparations begin. I am submerged in a hot bath, scrubbed, dried, combed, massaged, and, at last, dressed.

In Eidermark, it is customary for the couple to wear cream or ivory, representing their new beginning and the honesty they will share between them, and the nourishing milk the mother or *bjørn* will produce to feed their offspring. I wear my father's white leather shoes, found tucked away after my return to the throne, hidden by a quick-thinking servant in a seldom-used cupboard. They fit me perfectly, a convenience of nature that would suggest I'm ready to follow in his footsteps, should I believe in such arbitrary signs. Still, there is a sorcery in the air today that operates outside of logic, and I consciously allow myself to be swept away by it, just for a day. Just for today, let God and magic and destiny and good omens be real.

Cream trousers, form-fitting without being scandalous. It is customary for alphas to make their endowments clear as a sign of virility. They are embroidered up the outside of my legs with a strip of intricate gold stitching. Within the pattern of leaves, flowers, and vines, there are ravens and stags, wings entwined with the gilded flora. The pattern is repeated on the high collar and bottom hemline of my matching tunic, held snugly against my middle with a wide ivory belt woven in with cloth-of-gold. From my right shoulder cascades a long, flowing swath of gossamer fabric trimmed with gold and beads to give it enough weight to flow behind me just so. It is also our tradition to have some part of our wedding clothes be made of lace or delicate netting to represent the honesty and openness needed for a successful union, and this is mine. The crown my father wore when he married my mother has been lost, stolen by the usurpers, melted and sold to pay off those who helped with their uprising, but I have had a new one made. It is simple and elegantly savage – a series of miniature golden stag's antlers arranged in a circle around my brow with a single diamond in the center of my forehead.

As I am dressed and coiffed by my attendants under Randall's supervision, I ache for Will. I know he dislikes large gatherings, and while his royal upbringing has trained him flawlessly to suffer through them, I know the last thing he wants is for every eye in the kingdom fixed on his every move, word, glance, curl on his head. I wish I could be there now as he's preparing to assure him that he is loved that he could trip and fall on the way to the altar and my people would still love him. That I wouldn't bat an eye. It's unfair to him, to both of us, that a day meant to be so intimate, where we bind our souls together, should be crowded by a clamoring public. But this is the nature of our station and it can't be helped. Still, I will find a way to make it up to him.

Provided he says yes. That he hasn't fled the country in the dark of the night.

I cannot quiet the restless, agonized, ridiculous whining in my mind that fears the worst. That I should have been shown the possibility of love and being loved only to have it snatched away at the last second, a snake in the grass rising from its hiding place to strike, to poison my happiness and my heart. The way my family was taken from me.

At last, I proceed to my carriage, two attendants trotting behind me to ensure my cape doesn't drag on the ground. They tuck it safely inside with me, bow, offer their congratulations. And then we are moving. When we pass beneath what's left of Lord Tobias, I close my eyes and pray again. *See what gifts I've given you? How I have kept your dark-winged familiars well-fed?*

Unfortunate, perhaps, that we cannot be married in the sacrificial cavern of the Moragnethe. It would align with our union much more honestly. But, again, this is a political event as much as it is our wedding. We will be wed in Gammelstrand's cathedral, named for St. Sweyn, martyred by usurpers just like my parents and my sister. He founded the first school in Eidermark, which preceded any in Bittersea, Houtland, or Ruthenia, and it stands today as our Physicians College.

The land upon which the cathedral sits was holy to the worshippers of the Old Gods, but with the arrival of the book, the pagan henge was knocked down and used to help build the travertine foundation that held a stave church. As the Book's power grew, the cathedral was

rebuilt with brick over many decades, chapels added on each generation by Lecters with careful adherence to the building's pointed gothic towers and wide rounded sections full of more subtly arched windows.

I know every stained-glass window, every crypt, every brick. While I harbor no illusions – God's sense of humor could easily cause the ceiling to collapse on us at any moment – the structure itself is a chronicle of my family and my kingdom. It is beautiful, and made even more so today, filled with white candles and garlands of early spring flowers, some brought up from greenhouses in the south by couriers on swift horses, riding all day and all night to arrive with them in time.

The pews are full to brimming with my guests. My heart has been steady and quiet for years now, its rhythm never changing even as I kill and eat. But now it, too, is full to brimming. Will has awakened it and it will not be calmed.

My guests stand as I begin the slow walk down the aisle to the altar, my gossamer cape whispering over the floor, beneath which are the catacombs, bone-harbor for my ancestors, and the sacred stones of Eidermark's pagan forebears. I was concerned that without Lord Tobias' talent the music academy's performances today wouldn't be up to snuff, but his successor, Lord Douglas, Viscount of Wilson, has taken the reins with a steady hand and managed to re-write the program, including a song for Will's entrance written by one of the school's new omegan students, a prodigy from our southern lands.

Archbishop Davies himself will perform the rite, and is waiting at his place, the oldest copy of the Book in Eidermark balanced on an intricately carved wooden podium in front of him. There is nothing to do now but put one foot in front of the other until I have taken my place before him, turning back to look at the cathedral doors, the attendants scurrying as gracefully as they can to arrange my drape and then disappear.

The song ends, which should mark the beginning of Will's. But the door doesn't open. Despite the candles and bodies warming the soaring space, I am frozen. My hands are clasped behind my back, my spine rigid, my face forced into a pleasant expression that feels like it could slip off and shatter on the ground. Like a teacup.

The viscount has prepared for this, and the choir takes over acapella, saturating the grand arched sanctuary with their layered voices made of crystal and honey.

There is a land we love

with mighty spruce trees tow'ring o'er

The briny shores above

Its hills and valleys gently fall,

'Tis the name of Eidermark

Ringing through our halls!

There in the days of yore

All enemies were bested

'Tween their frays of gore

Eidermark went forth the foe to face,

Now found in stone-set barrows,

Their final resting place.

This land is still as fair,

The sea is blue around it,

And peace is cherished here

Strong men and noble women still

Uphold their country's honor

With faithfulness and skill.

Hail king and fatherland!

Hail citizens of honor,

Who do the best they can.

Our ancient Eidermark shall remain,

As long as spruce peaks mirror

In waves of blue their chain!

“Please, Will,” I murmur beneath the song’s final note.

The doors open, letting in a draught of rain-wet air. The puny clouds I saw gathering on the horizon must have swelled large and broken over our city. In Eidermark, rain on a wedding is the most auspicious sign for future happiness.

Soaked attendants are holding a massive, oiled canvas above them with metal poles, guiding it to the cathedral doors, others rushing forward to lay down a series of rugs for wet feet.

From beneath the shadow of the canopy comes a figure in white, and in the next draught of stormy wind that howls down the aisle toward the altar, I catch his scent. It tears a greedy rumble from my throat as my lungs and heart unclench.

It's Will. And while I had never thought it possible, he is more beautiful now than I've ever seen him. His tunic is cream silk with a deep neckline, and he wears it with a cummerbund of the same material, laced tight over his slender middle. The sleeves billow out before tapering back into cuffs trimmed with a delicate strand of lace. He's wearing the gold sandals he hated so much the first day we met, when his Regent cousin forced him to be so inappropriately dressed for the weather to entice me. I never told him, but I've dearly wanted to see his pretty feet strapped into them again.

His curls are shiny, each one carefully defined, likely by Georgia's fingers and a touch of wax, and arranged with care over and around his golden diadem. It is a simple design save for the stag's head shape in the center with a diamond clasped in its antlers, the tines acting as the gem's settings, matching his engagement ring. But most beautiful of all is the way he looks at me, the blush that rushes to his face, the longing in his eyes, the way his smile seems to say, *at last, at last.*

As he turns to kiss Alana, who has escorted him down the aisle, I see the back of his tunic is all floral lace with sections of thin netting like my shoulder cape, giving me hints of his back's shapely musculature. I break out into a sweat.

And now, we stand in front of our capricious God, Archbishop Davies, Alana and Georgia and Randall and the Komedas and everyone of import and pledge ourselves to one another. I add a band of diamonds and rubies to his finger, slipping them on to rest next to his engagement ring. And he places a ring on my finger, a simple angel's blood band on the outside, but with our initials carved on the inside, and three words – *I see you.*

Now we clasp our ringed hands together. His touch is a balm for every wound I've endured in my time on this earth, from the startling cold I must have felt leaving the womb to the death of my family, the broken bones and slashes earned in battle, the caged loneliness of my heart that battered itself bloody against the bars.

Archbishop Davies wraps the ceremonial cord around our hands slowly, speaking his blessings. What only I know is that while the cord is a family heirloom, I unraveled part of it and wove in the preserved sinews and tendons of the assassin Lord Tobias had ordered to kill me. The man whose throat Will cut, bathing himself in the traitor's blood.

"King Hannibal Lecter, Sovereign of Eidermark, and William James Graham of the House of Beauregard-Devereaux, prince of Gaulemagne, may the light of friendship reach you, shine on you now and for the rest of your lives. May this light glow as love and guide your paths together. May the laughter of children grace the halls of your home…"

It is beyond me to think this man speaks for any kind of universal presence, but again, we are in a realm of magic, a tale told to children on dark winter nights. I let it be a prayer.

These are the hands of your best friend, young and strong and full of love for you, that are holding yours on your wedding day, as you pledge your troth to one another today, tomorrow, and forever.

These are the hands that will work alongside yours, as you build the future of Eidermark together.

These are the hands that will love you and cherish you through the years and with the slightest touch, will comfort you in sickness and in health.

These are the hands that will hold you when fear or grief fills your mind.

These are the hands that will countless times wipe the tears from your eyes, tears of sorrow and tears of joy.

These are the hands that will hold your children close.

These are the hands that will give you strength and defend your life.

These are the hands that even when wrinkled and aged, will still be reaching for yours, still giving you the same unspoken tenderness with just a touch.

May your mornings bring joy, and your evenings bring peace.

May your troubles grow few as your blessings increase.

May the saddest day of your future

Be no worse than the happiest day of your past.

May your hands be forever clasped in friendship.

And when eternity beckons, at the end of a life heaped high with love.

May you know nothing but happiness from this day forward.

So lost am I in his eyes, in the feeling of the cord binding our hands together, knowing it is made of his beautiful murder, that I do not hear the archbishop give permission for us to kiss. But Will's lips come for mine like a stalking predator making the sudden final leap, throwing his free arm around my neck. I melt into him, gripping the bow of his back and crushing our bound and clasped hands together between us, not a barrier, but to protect them, enveloping them with our living bodies.

The church loses its sanctified silence and demure music. The people erupt, drowning out the choir with their cheering, and the musicians abandon the recessional, bursting out

instead with the anthem I wrote for Will, meant to be sung to him as he entered my kingdom for the first time.

His kiss is hungry and wanton and it sets me ablaze. We do not part until the archbishop taps my shoulder. I growl again, loud enough that he shrinks back, and it harmonizes with a similar sound that comes from Will, a savage warning. I kiss him deeply again, one more time, and come dangerously close to bending my husband over the altar and making an heir right now.

But he manages to compose himself and lean back, and I follow his lead. Anything for him.

Our hands still bound together, we leave the cathedral and climb into the waiting carriage, protected by the attendants holding their oiled canvasses above our heads, others busily carrying the end of my cape.

The moment the carriage door closes, he twists the handfasting cord free and loops it around my neck in a movement so swift I spend half a second wondering if this was all a ruse to assassinate me. But he uses it to drag me down on top of him on the padded seat, our mouths searing together again. Crowns and diadems rolling onto the floor, perfect curls ruined, ivory silk creased, we are a delightful, feral mess of groping hands and hungry mouths.

I haul him up now, oblivious to the cord around my neck, and he is feverishly pliant in my arms, begging me to own his limbs. I spread his legs, helping myself to a long grope between them that makes him stifle a moan in my neck, before parting his knees and pulling him onto my lap. I don't care what anyone can see through the glass.

He clings to me and I bury my face in his neck, glutting myself on his sweetness, breathing him in greedily as he scents me. My eyes must be as red as the blood that pounds through my heart in the rhythm of his praise, that pulses through his veins with such force that I can feel it beneath my lips. Pushing the neck of his tunic further open, I kiss and suck on the bony protuberance of his collarbone and tempt fate, ghosting my teeth over his mating gland, which swells out from the side of his throat more prominently by the minute. Being so close to claiming him and yet so far threatens to throw my reason from me like a wild horse rids itself of a rider.

"It must… frighten you," Will manages between breathless little sounds of bliss.

"What's that?" I say, my voice muffled as I nuzzle his neck against my cheek, then lick him from the corner of his jaw to his chin in a tantalizing swipe.

"You had… so much… control o-over yourself… before you met me…" Will's words are faint between breathless kisses, but I can hear the teasing lilt. He does know me. He has seen me. He can hear my thoughts or sense their rippled echoes.

"It does," I admit, pulling back to look at him, relishing in the feel of his fingers in my hair and stroking my face. "But I wouldn't have it any other way." With that, I snatch his thumb into my mouth and give it a hard suck that makes him gasp, then laugh.

We've arrived at the palace and are forced to straighten ourselves as best we can and exit the conveyance, protected yet again by our faithful awning-bearers. Inside, the staff is waiting. Some of the guests have already arrived, and we are expected for the feast.

Hours and hours, tortured by his nearness and his scent, a cup of water just out of reach that could save a dying prisoner. Receiving our guests and acknowledging their gifts, tasting him in my mouth even as I pause to eat a few bites of this or that, the scents of food and flowers and other bodies doing nothing to mask his divine essence – it is all a delicious torment and an exercise in saintly patience. Mere moments after our last guest has been honored with our thanks and is headed to his table, Georgia and Alana swoop in and spirit Will away, with Jack and his acolyte Miriam in tow. Sutcliffe gives me a knowing look, one eyebrow raised, and speaks behind his hand to Baron Komeda, who then whispers to his wife.

If having Will next to me yet untouchable was torture, knowing he's in his chamber right now preparing himself for our wedding night sharpens the hunger thousandfold. Each minute a turn of the whetstone, grinding down, honing the blade that slices me every moment we are apart.

I wait the hour I am forced to, and then take my leave after a final toast.

It is time to make an heir to the throne of Eidermark.

"Just pretend they're not there," Georgia repeated, again, unhelpfully, as she held up his pale blue silk dressing gown. Will tossed aside the towel he'd been using after his scented bath and put it on quickly, his hands shaking as he tied the cord.

"How am I supposed to do that?" he lamented, plopping down on a stool so she could comb through his hair again and arrange the curls. Winston trotted up and put his head on Will's knee. Will stroked his ears with a sigh. "I knew it was coming. I just… put it out of my mind until…"

"It'll be fine. You parents went through it. His parents went through it–"

"Georgia, you're not helping!" He sighed again, glancing up to apologize. "I'm sorry, I–"

"Will," she said, placing her hands on his shoulders, comb still clasped between two fingers. "You trust Hannibal, don't you?"

Will nodded.

"Let him take care of you," she suggested. "And leave it at that."

At last, some advice that seemed to quell his panic. He nodded, then accepted her offer of a stiff drink.

They both jumped when the knock at the door echoed through the quiet chambers, and quickly stood to answer it. “I put your water cup next to the left side of the bed,” she said as they hurried to the door, “and the book you’re reading, and in the armoire, there are extra nightshirts and underwear and stockings. Oh, and your other comb is in the top drawer and that pillow you like is on the bed already…”

He caught her hand before they answered the door and pulled her into a hug. “Thank you.”

“The dogs will be lonesome,” she said, sniffing, wiping a tear with the heel of her hand.

“Just sleep in my bed,” Will suggested. “And let them all in with you. Who cares what the housekeepers say?”

She laughed through her tears, nodding. Then, she reached out and opened the door.

It was Jack and Alana, ready to escort Will to the king’s chambers.

Will’s head felt half-connected to his body as they walked, his feet soft on the marble floors, encased in matching blue velvet slippers, Jack’s cloak over his shoulders with the hood pulled up. Jack marched silently at his side, his head held high. Will thought he’d be jovial, joking, at least smiling. This was his last official act as Will’s guardian before he’d be allowed to return to Bella. Instead, his expression was severe, and his nose twitched. Will noticed he had his mask down around his neck, and it smelled strongly of clove oil and essence of orange, ready to be pulled up at a moment’s notice.

At last, they found themselves before the king’s chamber doors. They were open, illuminated from within by candlelight, tapers glimmering in holders on any spare surface. The bed was a massive thing carved of dark wood, with thick, ancient posts and an elaborate curved headboard. The heavy curtains one would expect from such a piece of furniture were conspicuously absent, having been replaced with thin sheets easily seen through, providing only the smallest measure of privacy.

Archbishop Davies, Dr. Sutcliffe the younger, and the Baron and Baroness Komeda stood when they entered. They’d been seated in chairs around the bed with viewpoints from various angles. There was also a cushioned lounge near the armoire illuminated by several standing candelabras. Will knew what it was for and it made his stomach knot up, even though he had nothing to hide.

Desperate for comfort, Will’s eyes searched instinctively for Hannibal and found him in the bed, wearing a white nightshirt already unlaced at the throat, though the blankets pulled up demurely to his shoulders. He sat up, a nakedly eager motion, as Will stepped into the room.

Alana hugged and kissed Will’s cheek. “I’m so happy for you,” she gushed, brushing a tear from her eye. “I’ll be praying for you both.”

Will murmured his thanks, and she left, shutting the heavy door behind herself. Jack turned the key in the lock and pocketed it, then pulled his mask up, the fabric rasping against his stubble. Will only heard this; his eyes were locked on his husband’s, relishing their flare of red that Will could see easily through the thin linen curtains.

“Your Highness,” Dr. Sutcliffe greeted gently, motioning to the lounge.

Will tightened his jaw and clenched his fists through a slow exhale of resignation, but before he could move, Hannibal’s voice cut through the ceremonial quiet. “The bed is more appropriate.” There was an underlying growl to his words, punctuating the consonants, an alpha’s voice in no uncertain terms. An alpha king.

Hannibal motioned to Will, and he obeyed instantly, his submission soaking him with an instinctive relief. The witnesses parted the thin bed curtains and Will reached out, grasping Hannibal’s hand. “It will only take a minute,” Hannibal promised, helping him onto the mattress.

“If you’d slide down to the end, please, Your Highness,” Dr. Sutcliffe acquiesced as the archbishop and Baroness Komeda brought over a candelabra each, standing on either side of him to provide sufficient light. Will glanced over to see Jack and Miriam standing on either side of the doors as if standing guard. Miriam kept her vision soft, as if she wasn’t looking at anything specific, her clear eyes observant, professional. Jack, on the other hand, was staring directly at Will, his posture rigid, brow furrowed.

After carefully washing and drying his hands in the nearby basin, Dr. Sutcliffe had Will sit at the end of the bed and put his heels up on the rail of the footboard. Will leaned back and found himself resting in Hannibal’s arms. He relaxed, the tension bleeding out of him even as Sutcliffe opened Will’s dressing gown and spread his legs, carefully examining his cock, then moving it aside. He felt along Will’s belly, pressing here and there, and then slipped an oiled finger inside Will’s canal for a few gently probing touches. It called up memories of his first examination all those months ago, conducted at the border of Eidermark. This was much less awful, however; while it was happening in front of an audience of people he barely knew, some he’d only met that day in the case of the archbishop, he felt no distress. He was in Hannibal’s embrace, breathing in his pine-smoke-musk-floral alpha scent. He closed his eyes as Hannibal stroked his hair, and waited for it to be over.

“He is not pregnant,” Dr. Sutcliffe reported as he washed his hands again, breaking the expectant silence. “And he is still a virgin.”

A collective sigh of relief that ended with a quiet gasp from Will as Hannibal hauled him into his arms, throwing back the sheets and trapping Will in his embrace. The witnesses closed the thin curtains demurely and took their seats as Hannibal kissed him, pausing to cup his cheek. “Are you all right?” he whispered. Their act might be public, but what they said to one another in these moments didn’t have to be.

Will nodded even as he skimmed his teeth over his lower lip. He grounded himself by resting his hands on Hannibal’s back. “I know we have to,” he whispered back. “I-I knew this was coming, but…”

“Focus on me, Will,” the king’s words puffed against his neck between kisses as he slid his bare leg between Will’s, eyes blazing red, the strain of lust giving his soft, cultured voice a rasping quality that sent shivers across Will’s skin. “Trust me, beloved. I’m going to make you forget them.”

He eased back to draw his nightshirt off and abandon it, unable, it seemed, to help himself, pausing to let Will take in the sight, his aristocratic mouth turned up at the corners when Will ran his hands over his chest with reverence, stroking through the crop of curly hair.

“Finally,” Will murmured. After all this time, long months of engagement. He felt heat rising to his cheeks as desire seeped through his veins, his cock twitching hopefully as the scent of his wetness filled the air. Hannibal’s nostrils flared again, and he emitted a low, dangerous rumble, yanking open the dressing gown’s tie and lifting Will to pull it off entirely. His blood-maroon eyes, black with blown-open pupils, raked over Will’s body beneath his with a gaze as heavy and possessive as any touch.

No more looking. There were other senses to attend to, screaming instincts that drowned out the rest of the world. Will closed his eyes and welcomed the darkness of sensation, falling headfirst into Hannibal. His alpha, his *husband*.

They tangled in a passionate grapple, chests and lips crushed together, Will’s fingers clawing at the topography of Hannibal’s muscled back, the meaty curve of his ass. The alpha growled, and it was thunderous in Will’s ear with his lips so close. He snatched Will’s hands away and shoved his wrists against the mattress, diving in to attack his neck with brutal kisses, stinging bites, and teasings of his tongue. Will’s muscles went pliant instantly and some part of him, far, far away, was amazed with how quickly the instinctive submission took hold, as much as his writings and omegan activism had influenced his worldview. There was no time or room for any sort of shame, guilt, even a conscious thought. There was only Hannibal, fulfilling his promise to leave Will’s mind wiped clean of anything but himself.

Hannibal’s response to Will’s compliance was to let go of his wrists to run his large, warm hands all over Will’s chest and shoulders, kissing down his neck again and visiting lingering presses of his lips over Will’s heart. He left this sacred place to embrace once again the profane, flickering his tongue over Will’s hard nipple, sucking it into his mouth and tasting it, grazing it with his teeth, then delivering the same treatment. Will’s breaths came fast, and he could feel the sensation of wetness flowing out of his opening, more with each passing moment.

Hannibal’s lips skimmed across his stomach before he lifted Will’s cock, wrapping it in his fist for a few strokes as he buried his face between Will’s thighs and licked his wet seam, tongue lapping greedily further back, brushing against the pucker of his ass. Will couldn’t keep quiet, and the more he moaned, the louder, the more he was rewarded, Hannibal’s tongue delving past his labia for a deep probing, then licking up to the base of his cock, humming in pleasure at the flavor of Will’s slick. “You taste so good, beloved,” Hannibal managed, his voice gravelly with growled desire. “So sweet.”

Will squirmed as Hannibal’s hands gripped his thighs from beneath. “Please,” he whined, unable to suffer any longer.

“You’re ready?”

“Yes,” Will insisted roughly, reaching for him only to have Hannibal take him by the throat. Will relaxed back again instantly and let Hannibal position his hips and bend his knees. Will tilted his head up, stealing a look at Hannibal’s thick alpha cock as he took it in hand,

bringing the dripping head against Will's opening. The sight filled him with a primal pride and spiked the need, the aching emptiness inside of him.

And then, he wasn't empty anymore. Hannibal let out a strangled snarl as he buried himself in Will's body, locking them together as nature intended, Will's legs wrapping around his back. Will's mouth fell open in a breathless half-scream as he felt something tear inside of him. But it didn't hurt. He felt stretched, and there was a faint burn around his opening as a result, but it was gone within seconds.

From outside of the curtains came an echo of Hannibal's growl of delight, an answering snarl, and the sound of breaking crockery, the metallic clang as a candelabra tipped over. Shouting voices. Will caught a glimpse of Jack through the gossamer curtains, his eyes red, face contorted in a possessive rage, mask on but apparently useless. Miriam was latched onto his back, her arm locked around his throat, choking him out as Sutcliffe and the Komedas wrestled him back. The archbishop held up his robes and stamped out the candles that had landed on the carpet.

Hannibal's guttural snarl filled his ears as the alpha twined his hand in Will's hair, bending his head back and exposing his neck and the pulsing gland beneath the skin. Will was aware of nothing else now, the world outside the curtains melting away, the sounds nothing but distant footsteps fleeing into silence. Hannibal's scent wrapped around him like a tightly winding shroud, his grip made of angel's blood, occupying Will's mind and body with the same intensity of penetration.

The friction of Hannibal's frenzied thrusting, and the way he was leaning over Will culminated in an orgasm that blasted through Will's body with a searing intensity he'd never felt before. But that was nothing compared to what the knot felt like.

When Hannibal came, he crushed Will to him by the back of his head and the small of his back, an inhuman howl tearing from between his lips. The sound was muffled a moment later when Will gripped his hair in turn and forced Hannibal's head against his neck.

Hannibal's mouth closed around the gland and he bit down. A scream tore out of Will's throat as the sharp agony overlapped with the intense, breath-stealing pleasure that colonized him from head to toe as Hannibal's knot filled up, stretching him to his limit and bringing the fabled omegan orgasm from his Neithaal's Rise.

Pleasure. Hannibal. Alpha. Hannibal. Kiss. Alpha. Hannibal. Breathe. Kiss. Hannibal. Alpha. His alpha.

He was dimly aware of Hannibal pulling out with a satisfied whine and rolling onto his back. The curtains rustled, and Dr. Sutcliffe leaned in with a single candle, just enough to see Will, laying there, debauched, legs still awkwardly spread, feeling his slick and Hannibal's seed dribbling slowly out of his crevice. The doctor gave a quick nod and withdrew. "Success," he said to whoever was left in the room – Will didn't know.

Someone blew out the candles, and with a final click, the door to the bedchamber shut, leaving them alone at last. Hannibal pulled Will against him, curling his body around and tucking them under the duvet. He licked the raw wound on Will's neck with soothing strokes.

Will purred like he'd never done before, a loud and sustained rumble from deep within his ribcage, oscillating with each breath in and out.

"Rest," Hannibal whispered against his ear now. "And when you wake, I'll give you what you need again."

"Oh," Will smiled as he sighed through an exhausted, half asleep already but awake enough to tease. "And what is it… that I need… Your Majesty…?"

"The heirs to the throne of Eidermark growing inside you," came the breathy reply, followed by a lingering, worshipful kiss.

End of Part 1

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